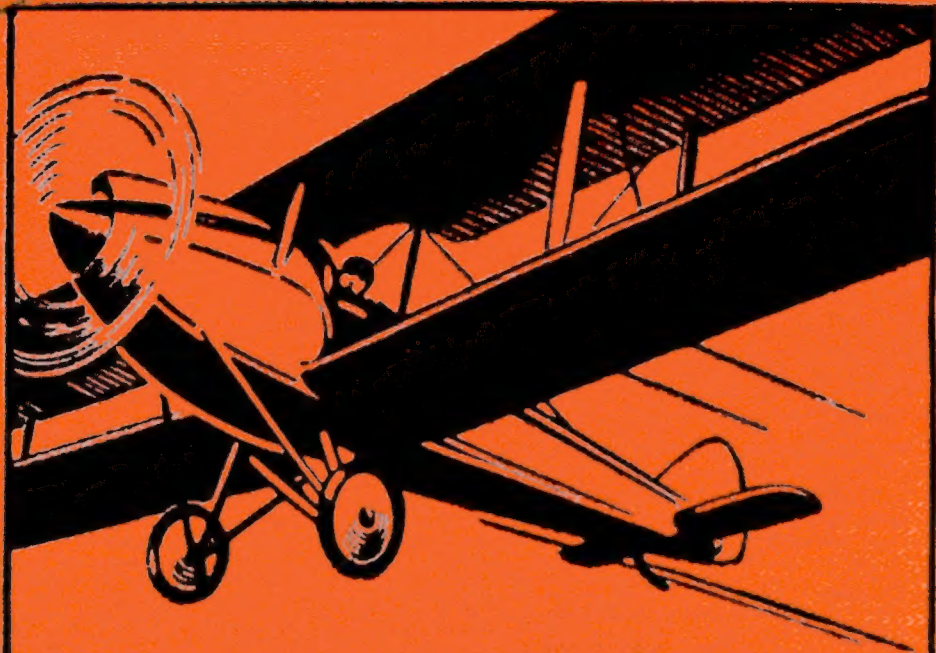


THE FLYING TURK

A vibrant, pulp-style illustration of a red flying saucer, labeled 'FZU-1K', streaking across a blue sky. The saucer is angled downwards from the upper left, leaving a white contrail. It is firing a bright yellow beam of light from its front-mounted weapon towards a dark, cylindrical object in the lower right corner, which appears to be a ship or a large structure. The background shows a cityscape with buildings and a body of water, all rendered in a classic, slightly grainy style. The overall tone is dramatic and action-oriented.

JOHN CREASEY



THE
FLYING TURK

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THE FLYING TURK



THE FELLOW'S CHIN JUTTED FORWARD, AND FRANK USED HIS RIGHT FIST FOR A TREMENDOUS UPPER-CUT WHICH LITERALLY LIFTED THE MAN OFF HIS FEET AND SENT HIM CRASHING BACK AGAINST THE CAR

THE FLYING TURK

BY

JOHN CREASEY

LONDON

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & CO., LTD.

**MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY PURNELL AND SONS, LTD.
PAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON**

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. TERM END	I
II. RE-UNION	13
III. IN THE AIR	23
IV. A NARROW ESCAPE	35
V. MARSEILLES	46
VI. A SUSPICIOUS STRANGER	62
VII. A ROAD CHASE	73
VIII. A PRISONER	84
IX. MORE TROUBLE!	95
X. A THREAT	106
XI. IN PURSUIT	117
XII. AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT	129
XIII. THE BATTLE IN THE AIR	138
XIV. NEWS!	149
XV. AT ALEPPO	160
XVI. HERAT!	175
XVII. THE STRONGHOLD	188
XVIII. THE BATTLE	202
XIX. THE RESCUE	213
XX. THE GOLDFIELD	227
XXI. THE HOME FLIGHT	239

THE FLYING TURK

CHAPTER I

TERM END

"GET a move on there, Mason. If you're not going away, that's no reason why you should stop anyone else."

The high-pitched voice of Percy Manders echoed clearly above the hum of conversation, the banging of cases and shoes, and the general hubbub inevitable in a school dormitory just before the end of the term.

Packing had to be done, last minute debts paid up, hasty good-byes to the fortunate few who were being called for by their parents and were leaving Maychester by road, these and a thousand other things had to be finished before the last lad left the dormitory, all agog for the commencement of the long summer holiday.

Percy Manders was not popular at Maychester, and his words brought a frown to a dozen faces. But Frank Mason simply shrugged his shoulders and moved on one side.

Manders was a tall, weedy specimen, with a tremendous sense of his own importance and an absolute lack of consideration for the feelings of others. Frank Mason, on the other hand, was

The Flying Turk

popular at Maychester, a rather short lad of seventeen, with tousled curly hair, a pugnacious but open countenance, and a stocky, strong frame which enabled him to be one of the star members of the school fifteen as well as the most dogged bat Maychester had ever had to wear its Colours.

None of the two dozen lads who were bustling about the dormitory seriously thought that Percy Manders had deliberately tried to upset Frank. On the contrary it was just a typical thing for him to say, something which they knew would probably hurt the feelings of Frank a great deal, and yet which Manders would think nothing of.

To see Frank Mason's smile, and the shrug of his shoulders as he moved away, would have given no one any clue to his real feelings. Actually the youngster was almost at the end of his tether. For the second year in succession he had nowhere to go for his summer holidays, and as far as he could see they would be spent in or about the school, under the eagle eye of the headmaster. It might not have been so bad had he never experienced real holidays with his parents, but only two years before Frank Mason had been one of the jolly crowd now buzzing about and packing.

Then his mother had died, and his father had left England for a long spell in India.

At first Frank had not realised just what it was going to mean to him, even though he had

missed his mother tremendously. Had it been possible for him to return home at holiday times, however, and enjoy the company of his father, he might not have felt it so keenly. But the shock of losing his wife had been so great to Richard Mason that he had not been able to face England, and the result was that Frank was left entirely on his own.

Frank was sure in his own mind that his father did not intend him to be so miserable, but it so happened that before he left for India Mr. Mason had arranged for some friends of his to let Frank stay with them during the holidays. These friends, however, had gone to America almost immediately after Mr. Mason's departure for India, and the result was that Frank Mason had no friends left in England apart from those whom he had made at school.

Once or twice one of the other men had suggested that he should spend his holidays with them, but he had remembered the times when he had been with his family, and he knew that an outsider would not be welcome. Consequently he had always refused, and he needed no telling that the decent fellows who had offered were in no small measure relieved.

One youngster who had heard Manders' unkind words, however, knew something of what Frank was feeling.

Alan Blair was one of the smallest men in the Sixth at Maychester, but if he was small

The Flying Turk

he was wiry and strong, and he was probably the most popular lad at the school. He was very dark, his hair was straight, and he was extremely good-looking—three things sufficient to make anyone but Alan Blair very unpopular. But there was nothing of the fool about Alan, and if anyone made remarks about his stature he did not hesitate to go for them. From the days when he had started in the Third, Alan had shown his mettle, and from that time he and Frank Mason had been great friends.

Alan was perhaps the only man at Maychester with whom Frank could have spent a really enjoyable holiday, but it so happened that Alan's father was a rather grim, severe old man. Although Alan had asked him once or twice if Frank could join them on their holidays, he had been met with an uncompromising refusal.

Alan slipped across to Frank and gripped his elbow.

"I'd like to thrash that long streak so that his mother wouldn't recognise him," he muttered.

Frank smiled.

"I don't suppose he meant any harm," he said.

"If he'd only think before he opened that ugly trap of his," snapped Alan, whose temper was always on the quick side, "it might save him and others a lot of trouble."

"I'm not worrying about it," Frank assured him.

Alan glanced at his friend quickly.

"You're pretending not to," he said. "I know just how you're feeling, old man. I wish to goodness you could come with me."

"If you don't stop talking about it," snapped Frank Mason with an unusual hardness in his voice, "I shall do something darned silly, and neither of us will be happy about it. Quit talking, Alan, will you?"

Alan Blair fully understood what prompted the outburst, and with a smile he nodded and walked away to continue his packing.

Frank Mason decided that it was madness for him to stay up with the others any longer, and he went downstairs to the common room, a rather lonely, woeful figure.

Practically everyone in the school was up in their respective dormitories and no footstep disturbed the silence of the corridors downstairs. Maychester was a big school, at one time an abbey, and the old building was of solid stone, where footsteps rang out clearly.

The common room itself was a huge, half-circular room, in which Frank had often spent thoroughly happy hours. In fact his time at Maychester had been really enjoyable but for the memory of his mother's death, and the holidays that he spent here alone.

He knew that the Beak—Doctor Greywell—did his best to make him happy during the vacation, but the Head was a bachelor, a very

learned scholar, whose only interest was books. Moreover he was always averse to any of the lads at the school going into the village, and apart from tramping across country and watching an occasional cricket match in the village, there was nothing Frank would be able to do for six long weeks.

It was only natural that the lad should feel really unhappy, and he left the empty common room, and strolled along to the study which he shared with Alan Blair.

He knew that Alan would come along there before he left on the coach which would take the Sixth to the station, and he preferred not to say good-bye to any of the others.

He took a book on flying from a dozen volumes on the shelf, dropped into an easy-chair, and tried to interest himself in the records of some of the crack fliers who had blazed a trail across the skies. Normally anything to do with the air would have jerked Frank out of his gloom, but even that enthralling book held no attraction then. Twice he flung it down in disgust, twice again he picked it up and started to read, but it was no use. He stood up to look out of the window. He could just see the tail end of the cricket pitch, and the bare patch where the last match had been played. He had scored twenty-nine not out then, and had enabled Maychester to run out winners by a dozen runs.

As one or two of the strokes which he had

played came back to him, he smiled a little, and was soon lost in thought of the season's cricket. On the whole Maychester had been very successful, and although he was by no means vain, he knew that he had played a big part in many of their victories.

So immersed had he become in his thoughts that he did not hear the footsteps in the passage outside, and the opening of the door came suddenly as a surprise. He half-turned, expecting to see Alan Blair although he knew his friend had hardly had time to finish packing. It was not Alan. The last person Frank had expected to see was the tall white-haired Doctor Greywell.

It being the last day, the Doctor had discarded his cap and gown, and he was dressed in ordinary clothes. Somehow he looked more human like that, and less immersed in tomes of ancient law.

"Ah! you're here, Mason."

"Can I do anything for you, sir?"

The Head chuckled—in some ways he was quite a nice old fellow.

"Yes, my boy, you can run along to my study in half an hour's time. But before that you can run up to the dormitory and tell Blair I want to see him."

Frank stepped towards the door as the Head turned, and strolled upstairs, wondering why on earth both he and Alan should be wanted. Alan had not the slightest idea, and he looked

rather worried as he preceded Frank downstairs again to the Head's study.

As they passed the common room, Frank said:

"I'll wait in study six until you've finished."

"I'll go right there," promised Alan.

If nothing else, this summons from the Head had given Frank something to think about, and he spent the next quarter of an hour wondering what on earth could have happened. This time he was not surprised when the door opened and Alan stood on the threshold.

"Any trouble?" asked Frank.

Alan Blair was looking thoroughly down in the mouth and he flung himself in a chair.

"Of all the confounded, beastly tricks!" he said. "First of all there's a letter in this morning from my father, saying that he has been called away on urgent business and suggesting that you and I spend the early part of the holidays together——"

"But hang it," cried Frank, his eyes lighting up. "That's the finest news I've heard for——"

"But you've not heard all of it yet," grunted Alan. "The Head had the nerve to say he was very sorry but it was not possible, as you've got to go up to London to meet your father."

"My father!" cried Frank in astonishment. "But I didn't know he was coming back!"

Alan hesitated for a moment, and then stood up, forcing a smile.

"I'm sorry, old man," he said, "but it looks as though I've got to spend the holidays in this perishing place and you don't need telling that's not so good. But I'm darned glad your Dad's home, and that you look like having a break."

"Idiot," said Frank Mason suddenly in high glee. "Dad won't mind if you come with me."

"No, but the Head will."

"We'll work it somehow," said Frank. "I'd better be getting along."

Although he felt sorry for Alan Blair, it was a very different Frank Mason who hurried along to the Head's study. There was none of the gloom which had filled him earlier in the day. In his heart of hearts he realised that it was quite possible that Dr. Greywell would not let Alan leave the school, but on the other hand there was a possibility that they would be able to fix up something between them.

It was natural, however, that he should think more of the remarkable fact that his father was in England.

Not once had Richard Mason given his son a hint that he was returning, and Frank told himself that it was simply because his father had wanted to surprise him. But why hadn't he come to the school, instead of sending a message to the Head?

It was useless to ask questions, and Frank Mason tapped on the Head's study door, opening

The Flying Turk

it as the old man's gruff voice called "come in." Dr. Greywell was sitting at his desk, peering at some papers. He did not look up for a moment, until Frank coughed.

"Ah! It's you, Mason. I suppose Blair has told you I had a telegram from your father this morning?"

"He did say something about it," admitted Frank.

"He couldn't have said much because I didn't tell him much," said the Head. "It looks as though I'm going to have Blair for a companion this holiday instead of you. You'll be catching the one-fifteen train to London, Mason, and you won't have much time for packing. It's nearly twelve now."

"Where will I meet father?" asked Frank, trying to hide his excitement.

"He'll be on the platform at Waterloo," said Dr. Greywell. "He telephoned me a short while after the wire came, and asked me to make sure that you only took a little clothing—just enough for one change. Apparently"—the old man's eyes twinkled into Frank's—"he proposes to take you back with him to India for a week or two."

Frank Mason had had many surprises in his young life, but nothing as startling as that had ever happened.

"Out—out to India!" he exclaimed. "But we shan't have time to get there and back!"

"Normally you wouldn't," admitted Dr. Greywell, "but apparently you're going to fly to Karachi. I'm not at all sure that I approve of such a course, but after all he is your father."

Frank had an idea that the Head did not really disapprove, but he spent very little time thinking about it. It seemed absolutely incredible that anything like this should have happened. The thought of flying had been in his mind for years, but he had never dreamed that an opportunity for going up in the air would ever be presented.

And now this bombshell had come—he was to race to London, meet his father, and then they would go off together by air to India!

Frank thanked the Head and hurried out of the study. He did his best to think what Alan would feel, but he was quite sure in his own mind that the Head would never allow Alan to go with him on the flight. Had Mr. Mason proposed merely to spend a holiday somewhere in England Alan would probably have been able to go, but this was a different matter altogether.

It was a very excited Frank Mason who burst into his own study, and told Alan Blair just what had happened.

Alan had recovered himself a little now, and was determined to do nothing which might spoil his friend's unexpected holiday. He was full of expressions of goodwill, and he success-

The Flying Turk

fully hid the envy which he felt at the prospect in front of Frank Mason.

Both lads had been fanatically keen on everything to do with the air for the last three terms, and aeroplanes had furnished the subject of many conversations. Alan himself had actually managed to persuade his father to let him go up on a joy-flight, and that single trip had been a fruitful topic.

Now the shoe was on the other foot with a vengeance.

Alan drew a deep breath, and thumped his friend in the ribs.

"Seeing that you've got to catch that early train," he said, "I'd better come up and help you pack."

Frank accepted the offer thankfully, thinking as he did so that Alan was a first class sport. At that moment the idea which was to come very soon had not occurred to him.

He did ask when Alan's father was leaving for this business trip, and Alan had replied:

"He's going to-morrow morning, according to the Head. Ah, well, we'll be able to swop air yarns when you come back. I bet you I got more fun out of mine than you will!"

It was on that note that the two friends parted, Alan Blair to go back to the school and his desolate holiday, and Frank Mason towards the flight to India, an adventure greater than anything he had ever conceived.

CHAPTER II

RE-UNION

A DOZEN fellows from the Sixth were on the London train, and Frank was in one of the compartments with them, so that the time passed quickly. Mason's school was in Hampshire, and as the train was a very fast one, in less than two hours they were steaming into Waterloo Station.

Bearing in mind the telephone message from his father, Frank had only packed one case, and consequently he was able to get out on to the platform much quicker than the others. He cried good-bye a dozen times as he forced his way past the crowd of porters waiting by the train.

Then he stared up and down the platform quickly for a glimpse of his father. Over two years had passed since he had last seen Richard Mason, and he had not realised before just how much he had missed him. His heart was beating much faster than usual, and he told himself that unless he was careful he would start blubbering.

As it happened Mr. Richard Mason prevented such a contingency, for he appeared suddenly behind Frank, and gripped his son's shoulder. Frank spun round, and then his eyes lighted up.

The Flying Turk

"Dad!"

"Frank, you young scamp!"

Their hands gripped, and for a moment all they could do was to stare at each other, their eyes gleaming, their lips parted.

It was Mr. Mason who spoke first.

"It's grand to see you again, old son!"

"It's pretty good to see you," said Frank. "But why on earth didn't you let me know you were coming?"

Mr. Mason chuckled. He was a tall, up-standing man, with the same fair hair as his son, the same grey eyes, but without Frank's pug nose. It hardly seemed a day since Frank had stood talking to his father on the station, and the two years which had passed seemed to drop away.

"I didn't know I was coming until a few days ago," said the older man, "and then I wasn't sure that I'd have any time to spend in England."

"You don't seriously mean you'd have gone back without seeing me?" asked Frank.

"I certainly wouldn't," agreed Mr. Mason, "but I might not have had an opportunity to take you to places. Certainly I didn't think there would be any likelihood of getting you away for a few weeks."

"It sounds like mystery," said Frank with a chuckle.

His father laughed.

"There's no mystery about it," he said.

"It's just that I'm doing some very important work up in the hills of Northern India, and certain materials are wanted which only a medical man can get. Again, the only place to get them was London or New York, and naturally I chose London."

"I still don't see why you could be uncertain whether you could take me back with you," said Frank. As he spoke they were walking along the platform, and not until they had passed the barrier did Mr. Mason answer.

"Actually," he said, "I expected to rush back by air to India, and then start off on a trek across the hills. Of course that's a job that only experienced men can tackle. I didn't see there was any prospect of giving you a holiday. But this morning early, I was telephoned from India——"

"Telephoned all the way from India!" gasped Frank.

"Why not?" asked Mr. Mason. "Yes, I was telephoned and I learned that the expedition through the hills won't be starting for another month. So I decided to wire Dr. Greywell, take you to India, show you about a bit, and then pack you home again in an Imperial Airways plane, while I went off on the expedition."

"What kind of expedition is it going to be?" asked Frank.

"Chiefly a medical one," said Mr. Mason who was a doctor, although he spent more time in

research than in actual doctoring, and he was wealthy enough not to need a general practice. "It's really rather a complicated business, old son, and what we are trying to do is to discover a cure for certain illnesses. But you won't want to be bored with that."

"It's not boring," Frank said quickly. "But it's a glorious opportunity."

"I thought you'd like it," said Mr. Mason, with a chuckle.

He did not make any comment on the fact that he had been away for so long, and it was typical of Frank that he said nothing either. All the memories of those unhappy holidays had gone. Everything would be made up for this time, and he'd have a summer vacation which would make the holidays of the other fellows seem absolutely colourless. But in imagination he was already in India, seeing the teeming millions in the big cities, the jungles, the towering mountains, and the hundred and one wonderful sights.

"When are we leaving?" he asked, as Mr. Mason bundled him into a taxi and ordered the driver to go to the Clayton Hotel.

"Our 'plane leaves Croydon to-morrow morning at eight o'clock," said Mr. Mason. "We'll have some lunch at the hotel, go and see a cricket match this afternoon, do a show this evening, get to bed fairly early and then start off. How does that sound?"

"It sounds too perfect to be true," said Frank Mason.

He meant just that for he was back again in the old days when his father had been such a wonderful companion, and when there had been no cloud to mar their happiness. His father had not changed at all in the two years, excepting for the fact that his face was a little browner, and he was, if anything, not quite so heavy.

Certainly the prospect was wonderful, and for a short while Frank forgot everything but the holiday which was to come. They were in the middle of lunch, at the Clayton Hotel in Piccadilly, when Frank suddenly remembered Alan Blair, as he poised a piece of potato on the end of his fork.

"Gone off your food?" asked his father, his eyes twinkling.

"No," said Frank, "but I've just remembered poor Alan."

"Alan Blair? What's the matter with him?" asked Mr. Mason.

"He's changed places with me," said Frank, and he explained just what had happened.

Mr. Mason nodded sympathetically, but he certainly did not expect Frank's sudden outburst.

"Dad! Did you know Mr. Blair?"

"I was a very young fag at Maychester when Growler Blair was in the Sixth. Even then Growler used to throw his weight about," said Mr. Mason, with a smile.

"You'd have thought that he'd have let me spend the other holidays with Alan," said Frank slowly. "Anyhow, that doesn't matter now. I wonder if you could——" he paused, and his father chuckled.

"Let it come, you young rip."

"It sounds an awful nerve," said Frank, "and it's only just occurred to me that it's cost an awful lot of money, but I was wondering whether you could persuade Mr. Blair to let Alan come with us."

His father rubbed his chin.

"I could try," he said. "But I'm not by any means sure he'll agree."

"I knew you would!" cried Frank. "And I'm sure you'll have some luck. When can you telephone him?"

"We'll finish lunch, and then I'll see what I can do. He still lives up in Oxfordshire, does he?"

"Yes," said Frank, and he finished his lunch with a feeling of great satisfaction.

He was in his father's room at the hotel when Mr. Mason telephoned Alan's father. For a few moments the two men talked on various things, exchanging greetings enough to make Frank thoroughly impatient. Then suddenly Mr. Mason said:

"By the way, Growler, I'm taking my youngster to India with me. Why don't you let young Alan come?"

Frank could hear the explosion even where he was sitting, and Mr. Blair's words came very clearly.

"What? If you spoil your son that's no reason why I should spoil mine!"

"That's right, that's right," said Mr. Mason, talking to the other man in a very similar way to which Frank would often talk to Alan, "get all worked up about nothing. Alan was looking forward to spending the holidays with Frank—why on earth you didn't let them be together before I don't know!—and unless he comes with us he's going to be thoroughly miserable."

The telephone cackled and spluttered, but Frank could not hear what Mr. Blair said. He heard his father's reply, however.

"No, being alone's not going to do him any good," said Mr. Mason, "it's going to do him a lot of harm. Why don't you be human for once in a while and let him come? I've already booked a reservation for him, so if you don't I shall lose my money."

Frank gasped; he had no idea that his father had done anything of the kind. It did occur to him as just possible that Mr. Mason was pulling Blair's leg.

The conversation went on for several moments and Frank's eyes began to dance as he realised that his father was getting his own way. At last Mr. Mason put down the receiver, and turned to Frank with a chuckle.

The Flying Turk

"Well, young 'un, we've managed it!"

Frank could have cried aloud with glee.

"It's a miracle," he said, "but—had you really taken those tickets?"

"In my mind I had," smiled his father. "The moment you made the suggestion I was determined that Alan should come with us, and with all respect to Growler Blair, if I couldn't get my own way with him on a little thing like that, I'd eat my hat. Now don't go getting excited, old son. Mr. Blair"—Mr. Mason seemed to forget he had been back in his school days for a few moments and grew serious and more formal—"is going to telephone Dr. Greywell immediately, and then Alan will telephone us here, to tell us what train he is coming by."

"It'll be the one which reaches London at six-fifteen," said Frank.

"That's good. We can go to Lord's for an hour or two, and then go on to Waterloo."

Thus it was arranged, and for the next three or four hours Frank Mason was thoroughly happy. He had always enjoyed watching big cricket, and that day one of the best M.C.C. batsmen was in glorious form, and hit a sparkling century.

From Lord's they hurried in a taxi to Waterloo, reaching the station just as the train came in. There were not many people on it, and Frank spotted Alan immediately.

Alan came out of his carriage, without worry-

ing about his case or anything. He raced up to Frank, hand outstretched.

"What a wow!" he cried. "I just couldn't believe it when the Head called me in and told me what had happened."

"You've got to thank Dad for that," said Frank.

A smiling Mr. Mason and Alan Blair shook hands, and the older man cut short Alan's flood of thanks.

"I want you both to have as good a time as you can. I don't mind admitting that I've rather neglected Frank lately, but I've always intended to make up for it one day. Now the opportunity has come, I'm glad that you can share in it."

Little more was said until they were back at the hotel where they were staying the night. Mr. Mason went out for an hour or so to do some odds and ends of shopping, while Frank and Alan talked excitedly over the coming flight.

Frank told his friend just when they were starting, and gave him some idea of the itinerary of the holiday. They were so excited and overjoyed at the prospect that they had no great desire to go out that night. Consequently Mr. Mason went to a theatre on his own, and the two youngsters went to bed early. They did not propose to be late on the morrow. They would have to leave the hotel by seven o'clock in order to reach Croydon in time to catch the Imperial

The Flying Turk

Airways 'plane, and before they retired everything was packed and ready for the flight.

Mr. Mason had explained that they would need very different clothes in India from what they wore in England, and he had telephoned for two complete outfits for each lad.

Neither Frank nor Alan found it easy to get to sleep, but once they were well away they did not wake up until they were called at six o'clock on the following morning.

Their packing being done, all they had to do was to have a quick bath and a good breakfast. Then a car which Mr. Mason had hired for the occasion drew up outside the hotel, and the two excited lads jumped inside it. The comparatively short journey to Croydon was accomplished in under three-quarters of an hour—for it was too early for there to be much traffic on the road—and at a quarter-to-eight the car turned into the gateway of the Croydon Aerodrome. They climbed out and walked quickly across the even surface of the landing field towards the huge Imperial Airways tri-engined monoplane which was ready and waiting to start on its flight nearly half-way across the world.

And in something under five minutes both lads would be in the air, at the commencement of the greatest adventure in their lives.

CHAPTER III

IN THE AIR

THOSE last few minutes on the ground seemed to drag out tantalisingly to the two youngsters. Mr. Mason was sitting immediately behind them, and they were sharing a seat which enabled them to look out of the windows of the cabin.

In the excitement which naturally filled them at the prospect of going up, they did not spare much time to look about the cabin itself.

Mr. Mason, however, was comparatively familiar with the big machine, and there was nothing strange to him in the luxurious appointments of the cabin. Actually there were four small cabins which were connected by a passage which ran down the centre of the 'plane. Another small room was at the far end, away from the engines, and in that room it was possible for passengers to smoke. Although, of course, on a much smaller scale, the inside of the aeroplane was very much like a luxury hotel.

Suddenly the engines began to roar.

The cabin door was wide open, and the sound shattered through the comparative silence. Both lads stared towards the whirling propellers,

seeing the white-clad mechanics who were bustling about the 'plane, hearing the roar of the three engines, and feeling the trembling of the huge machine.

There was a lot of shouting outside, men were hurrying to and fro, the pilot climbed in, and a minute later the cabin door was banged.

Outside, officials of the aerodrome and friends of the passengers—there were five other people in the 'plane—were waving their *adieux*. Then, so slowly that it was hardly possible to notice it, the aeroplane—called the *Cloud*—began to move.

It was natural that Frank Mason and Alan Blair should do nothing but stare outside at the fields and buildings which were sliding past them. Neither lad could have spoken for a fortune in that moment. Second by second the 'plane gathered speed, and both the engines were roaring louder than ever, until the sound penetrated the cabin.

It seemed an age while they ran along the ground, feeling the wheels bumping over the surface of the landing field, and all the time Frank wondered what it would feel like when they actually left the ground.

When it happened, he did not realise it.

The only change there was at first was that the bumping of the wheels over the turf stopped, but he did not notice it, for the *Cloud* was not climbing very steeply. In fact for a hundred

yards or more its wheels were only a few feet from the ground, but now they were travelling very fast, and the trees and buildings were flashing by.

Already the people who were waving them off looked very tiny in the distance, although Frank Mason and Alan Blair did not look behind them.

Suddenly the pilot—whom the lads could not see from their section of the cabin—must have pulled back more strongly on the joy-stick.

The nose of the *Cloud* pointed upwards at an angle of thirty degrees, and now they seemed to leap away from the ground. In a few seconds Alan and Frank found themselves staring over the side, looking down at the buildings, seeing everything as though they were looking through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars.

Now they were able to see the grey, huddled mass which was London, in the background. Nearer Croydon and the air-field the land was split up, some into small fields, others into tiny patches of red and white, representing new housing estates which, on the ground, spread for hundreds of square yards.

There were two things which impressed Frank Mason more than anything else in the start of that flight.

The first was the non-existence of any jerking, and the wonderfully smooth running of the machine. They did not seem to be moving,

although by now the giant *Cloud* must have been travelling at a hundred and fifty miles an hour. The second thing was the way in which everything seemed so tiny and insignificant beneath them.

They had no idea of the height at which they were travelling but it was soon obvious that they were thousands of feet in the air. So high were they now that they could hardly distinguish any of the objects on the land, which looked like a vast network of brown and green, threaded by little dark or light lines, which represented the big roadways leading from London towards the South.

For perhaps five minutes neither Frank nor Alan felt that they could talk. At last Frank drew a deep breath.

"So that's that!" he exclaimed with a tense smile. "Was it anything like you experienced before, Alan?"

Alan Blair forced a smile. Both lads were tremendously impressed by the take-off.

"It was and it wasn't," he said. "Of course the joy flight 'plane was nothing like so big as this, and there were only three of us in the cabin. It was like being in an Austin Seven and comparing it with a Rolls Royce!"

Mr. Mason chuckled from behind them.

"And which do you prefer?" he asked.

"Give me a Rolls Royce every time!" said Alan, looking round at the man who had made

this trip possible. "I shall never be able to thank you enough, Mr. Mason."

"We'd finished with that subject a long time ago," said Mr. Mason, and he hastened to change the subject. "How high do you think we are?"

Frank Mason made no effort to guess, and Alan said hesitantly:

"I suppose we must be five or six thousand feet up."

"I should say," said Mr. Mason, thoughtfully, "we're flying at at least ten thousand. Would you care to come along and look in the pilots' cabin?"

"Are we allowed to?" asked Alan breathlessly.

"I daresay it could be managed," said Richard Mason.

He stood up and led the way along the central passage through two more cabins very similar to that section in which they were sitting, into the small cabin at the front of the 'plane which the two pilots and the steward of the air-liner were occupying.

As they entered the steward stood up, bowed towards Mr. Mason, and Frank's father smiled in surprise.

"Hallo! The same crew as I came on, then?"

"That's right, sir," said the steward. "And I must be going along to prepare some breakfasts."

He smiled cheerfully at Alan and Frank, and they heard him walking along the passage. He was a short, broad-shouldered man with a brown

berry of a face and a cheerful smile. If the pilots were anything like him the two lads told themselves that they were going to get on well.

As it happened, the pilots—the senior of whom had flown hundreds of thousands of miles—were comparatively young and they had no objection to showing the two youngsters something of the working of the controls.

What at first sight seemed a most complicated mass of gadgets and instruments proved to be comparatively simple. The chief pilot—whose name was Dennis—showed them the joy-stick, which looked very much like the gear lever in a car, the rudder-bar which controlled the direction of the air-liner, and the throttle. Then he pointed out the air speed indicator, and he was about to go on to the altimeter and other instruments which it was necessary for them to read in order to accurately pilot the machine, when Frank said with a gasp:

“Do you really mean we’re travelling at two hundred miles an hour?”

“Why not?” asked the pilot. “When conditions are good that’s about our cruising speed.”

“I shouldn’t have thought you’d have time to work up to it,” said Alan.

“It doesn’t take long,” smiled Captain Dennis. “You can get up to fifty or sixty miles an hour in a modern car within a few seconds, and certainly you can touch two hundred miles an hour in the air within a minute.”

Frank thanked him, and then the pilot pointed to the altimeter, which was much more difficult to read.

It was Mr. Mason who pointed out that they were at a height of some twelve thousand feet, and once again both the schoolboys were tremendously impressed.

It hardly seemed possible that they were actually flying nearly two miles above the earth, although when they glanced down and saw the way in which the country was spread out beneath them, it was obvious that they were flying at a tremendous height.

Luckily for them the sky was absolutely clear of clouds, and the early morning sun was sending its bright rays through the glass of the cabin.

They stood for a few moments, and Frank could not help feeling that the job of flying a vast air-liner like this was nothing like so complicated as it had appeared to be when reading accounts of flying. Actually he learned that Captain Dennis had locked the controls and that they were now flying straight along their course towards Marseilles, which would be the first stop.

"We've got two passengers to pick up at Marseilles," the Captain told them, "and then we're going to turn in an easterly direction and fly over Italy, landing at Cyprus."

"How long do you have to wait at the various stopping places?" asked Alan.

"It depends on the circumstances," said Captain Dennis. "At Marseilles we shall take in extra petrol, but with any luck we won't stay there more than about half an hour. Again at Cyprus we shall have the engines looked over, but two hours should see us off again. On the other hand if we should have some reports of poor flying conditions further on the road, we shall probably wait for a few hours until we see what is likely to happen."

"What do you call 'bad' flying conditions?" asked Frank. He was a little dubious about putting so many questions, for he certainly did not want the pilots to grow weary of answering; but Captain Dennis was so pleasant that he did not feel that there was any risk of causing offence.

The chief pilot smiled.

"Bad weather conditions in one part of the world are comparatively good in others. If we are flying over a fairly flat stretch of land, then it's safe enough for us to go ahead. The big thing that we have to be careful about is to avoid flying through heavy storms when there are mountain ranges in the vicinity."

"I suppose," broke in Alan quickly, "that you might be forced to lose height during bad weather, and it's not always possible to be absolutely sure where the mountains are?"

Captain Dennis nodded, and it was obvious

that he appreciated the quick-wittedness of the suggestion.

"That's right," he admitted. "Flying on a day like this we can absolutely rely on our instruments, but in certain parts of Europe and Asia the level of the ground over which we are flying is a great deal above sea level. Thus if we're flying over a range of hills, where the land is perhaps a thousand feet above sea level at a dozen different places, even although our altimeter might show us five thousand feet, actually we have only four thousand feet to spare."

"What's the nearest you can fly to the ground?" asked Frank.

"Well," said Captain Dennis, "that again depends on circumstances. There are different rules in various countries, but usually unless you are about to land it's not wise to fly lower than four thousand feet. It's surprising how quickly you lose height, and if there should be the slightest trouble and the machine gets out of control, you must have several thousand feet in which to manœuvre."

There were a dozen more questions in the minds of both lads, but neither of them wanted to weary the pilots too much, and they thanked them warmly for answering as many as they had. Mr. Mason appreciated the fact that they did not try to take advantage of the good nature of Captain Dennis and his assistant. He felt very proud that he had got two first-class

youngsters with him, as they walked along the central passage again and found their own seats.

While in the pilots' cabin they had been too busy to look about them much, but now Frank looked out of the window, and to his astonishment he saw the sea.

"That must mean we've flown nearly fifty miles already," he said, with a gasp.

"We've been flying over a quarter of an hour, so it's just over fifty miles," agreed Mr. Mason. "We should be at Marseilles within three hours," he added.

Neither lad made any reply, for they were too interested in what they saw about them.

There were still no clouds in sight, and beneath them they saw the sea shining, a smiling blue beneath the sky. The water was smooth, but the small waves were all tipped with a reflection of the sun, and looking down on it the sea seemed to be a sparkling mass of diamonds, shimmering and dancing.

That fact passed through Frank Mason's mind as he glanced down, but he did not pass it on.

He sat back in his seat a few seconds later, marvelling at the fact that it was possible to fly it such a speed, and that the journey which a few years before would have taken days, could now be accomplished in a few hours. All that he had read about flying seemed colourless now that he was actually in the air himself, and the

excitement which he had felt at the commencement of the flight was, if anything, greater now.

Soon they could see the white cliffs of Dover behind them, and the coast line of England, while ahead of them was a dark-grey mist which they knew was France.

It was Alan who suggested that they should get a map—they had both brought their atlases—and see whether they could recognise the towns in France over which they were going to fly. Mr. Mason walked along to the smoking cabin and left them to enjoy themselves without interruption.

Frank was looking out of the window, towards England, and it was he who first sighted the other aeroplane. The machine was quite near them, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, and it seemed to be flying very fast. He pointed it out to Alan, and taking binoculars which were in front of them, they peered up at it.

In a few seconds the second machine was almost directly above the *Cloud*, and knowing that they themselves were flying at a height of twelve thousand feet, they reasoned that the other aeroplane must be at a height of at least fifteen thousand.

"It's a twin-engined monoplane," said Alan, "and——"

Then he stopped.

Frank's hand was resting on his friend's arm, and suddenly his fingers tightened. Both of them

stared upwards as something dropped from the under-carriage of the monoplane above the *Cloud*, and they saw it falling downwards towards them. It flashed by the cabin of the *Cloud*, less than a hundred feet away, and although neither lad could believe it possible, the same thought was in their minds.

The long, black object which had dropped was a bomb!

CHAPTER IV

A NARROW ESCAPE

Two pairs of eyes followed the fall of the thing which had dropped from the monoplane, seeing it hurtle towards the sea, and then waiting tensely to see what happened. Only a few seconds passed, but those seconds seemed like minutes.

And then suddenly there was a tremendous flash of flame, a vast billowing of white and grey smoke, and although the explosion was so far away, it seemed to them that the very sea was split in two. They heard nothing, and had Frank not been glancing out of the window just at that moment they would have noticed nothing.

It was Frank Mason who broke the tension.

"I wonder if the pilots have seen it?" he snapped.

As he spoke Alan Blair jumped from his seat, and without another word both of them hurried towards the pilots' cabin. From time to time they glanced out of the window, towards the monoplane which they could just see. They did not say a word to the three passengers whom they passed, but they reached the pilots' room in something under ten seconds.

Captain Dennis looked round with a cheerful smile.

"Something else worrying you?" he asked.

And then he realised that something serious was the matter, from the expression on the faces of the two passengers.

"What on earth——" he began.

But Alan cut him short.

Alan Blair was always the quickest to talk and act, but Frank Mason more than made up for it by his perseverance and his reliability.

"I know it seems mad," whispered Alan, "but there's a 'plane flying above us——"

"We've seen it," admitted Dennis.

"And it dropped a bomb," said Alan.

Uttered like that the words seemed absurd; who on earth could desire to bomb the huge passenger 'plane from the air? Even as he uttered them Alan was telling himself that Captain Dennis would believe he was trying to create a sensation out of nothing.

But the expression on Frank Mason's face was sufficient to assure the captain that something *had* happened. He rapped a word of command to his assistant.

"Have a look at them, Tom. Now, young fellows, just what did you see?"

It was Frank who explained just what had happened, and his vivid description of the bursting of the bomb was more than sufficient to convince Captain Dennis that something was

seriously wrong. Even had he been doubtful, his assistant's words in the next moment would have proved that the lads were not romancing.

"They're right," he snapped. "There's another one falling now, but it'll miss us by fifty feet. What the devil does this mean?"

"I don't know," muttered Dennis, almost as if he were talking to himself. "Have you told anyone else?" He was glancing upwards, as he spoke, towards the monoplane which was now just visible from the pilots' cabin, but he was speaking to Frank.

"Not a soul," Frank assured him.

"Good," said Captain Dennis. "Slip along to your father, young man, and tell him. He'll know what to do."

Frank and Alan asked no questions, but obeyed the pilot. They passed the other three passengers, who looked at them uncertainly but made no comment.

There was a light, sudden tinkle as the pilot pressed the bell which summoned the steward, and the man with a face like a red berry passed the lads before they reached Mr. Mason. Obviously he had no idea what was happening, but a few seconds later he stared at Captain Dennis as though he could not believe his ears.

"We're being bombed!" he gasped.

"Something's going wrong," said Captain Dennis. "Go and warn the passengers to stand

by, Pete. Don't alarm them—just tell them we're having a bit of trouble with the engines."

The steward nodded and turned round. He knew as well as the pilot that the most important thing was to prevent any one of the passengers from being a victim of panic. Captain Dennis said nothing, but in his own mind he was telling himself that he had been lucky that two such level-headed youngsters had seen the thing happening, instead of two fellows who might easily have lost their heads.

While the other passengers were being warned of the possibility of trouble, Frank was telling his father just what he had seen.

At first Mr. Mason was inclined to think they were dreaming, but when he learned that the assistant pilot had actually seen the second bomb fall, he admitted that there was something in it.

"It doesn't seem possible," he said, "but——"

Before he finished he glanced upwards on the other side of the *Cloud*. This time the bomb fell on that side, and it could not have been more than thirty yards away from the air-liner. Mr. Mason's chin was jutting forward and he looked first at Frank and then at Alan.

"It looks nasty," he said, "but keep your heads."

"What's likely to happen?" asked Alan.

"It's impossible to say," admitted Mr. Mason.

"We'll have to leave it to the skipper."

He stood up, gripped the shoulders of both lads firmly, and went along to the pilots' cabin. By that time Captain Dennis had realised that there was actually a serious threat from above, and he was doing the only thing possible.

He first pulled back on the stick, sending the vast machine climbing steeply, and then he tickled the rudder-bar taking the machine round to the left. As he was doing it his assistant was giving a message over the wireless, deliberately keeping his voice low in order to avoid worrying the other passengers.

Mr. Mason heard him as he entered the cabin.

"Imperial Airway Liner *Cloud* being bombed by single monoplane ten miles off Dover. Flying direct on course. Imperial Airway Liner *Cloud* . . . " He repeated the message three times, and then glanced towards Mr. Mason.

"Hallo, sir. This looks nasty!"

"It looks worse than nasty," admitted Mr. Mason, but he was smiling. "Can I do anything?"

"I don't think so," said Captain Dennis. "If there's anything I'll send a message."

Mr. Mason nodded and went back to his cabin where he had left the two youngsters. Not for a moment had he dreamed when he had suggested taking them up into the air that anything like this could possibly have happened. On the surface it was madness—and yet it was fact and not fiction.

The Flying Turk

There was a tension in the air-liner now, for those three passengers who knew nothing of the actual cause for alarm were feeling worried and not a little scared at the possibility of being forced down. Captain Dennis left the machine in charge of his assistant for a moment and went along to try and reassure them. All the time the monoplane was flying above them, and the fourth bomb dropped from the skies.

This time it was nearly three hundred yards away, for the pilot's abrupt change of direction had temporarily outwitted the attackers.

But the monoplane was still above the air-liner.

The pilots, as well as Mr. Mason and his two charges, knew that there was a real possibility that one of the bombs would fall on top of the *Cloud*, and they knew that if that happened there was not the slightest chance of any of them escaping alive.

Frank Mason and Alan Blair said very little, but it would not be true to say that they did not feel afraid. Actually they had never been so frightened in their lives, but they were doing their utmost not to allow their fear to reveal itself.

Frank was thinking quickly.

He was trying to imagine any reason why such a dastardly attack should be made, and it seemed to him that there was a very simple explanation.

One member of the crew, or a passenger, was being bombed—that was the only likely explanation. In order to kill him, the men in the monoplane were prepared to destroy the vast flying ship and to send seven or eight other people to their death!

Once again Frank told himself that the thing did not seem possible, but it was useless to say that. He was doing his utmost not to dwell too much on the danger which surrounded them, for he knew they could do absolutely nothing.

But Captain Dennis, who knew that his big air-liner stood little or no chance against the much smaller and more easily manœuvrable monoplane, had made up his mind what to do.

He sent another word of warning by the steward, and then he sent the air-liner tearing round in a screeching bend. The air-liner seemed to be flying on its side for a few seconds, and had the passengers not been warned they must have been sent flying from their seats. As soon as the turn was completed, Captain Dennis pulled back on the stick, and began to climb even higher. Now the *Cloud* was nearing twenty thousand feet, and it was not very long before it was flying at its highest safety altitude. The monoplane was still above them, but the sudden turn had again outwitted its pilot and the sixth bomb fell nearly a quarter of a mile behind the *Cloud*.

The question was—how many bombs had the pilot got at his disposal?

None of the occupants of the *Cloud* could possibly know that, and the only thing that Captain Dennis could do was to fight off the attack as long as possible. He was watching the monoplane, and every time it drew within reasonable distance he changed the course of the *Cloud* abruptly. By now everyone in the air-liner was aware of what was happening, and in one respect, at least, Captain Dennis was fortunate. None of the passengers or the crew lost their heads.

All of them knew that it was a grim battle with death, and that luck or Providence would do more to save them even than the pilot. But he was doing everything he possibly could and the air-liner—although not made for stunt flying—was twisting this way and that in its desperate effort to escape from the attack from the air.

The seconds flew by, lengthening into minutes. Alan Blair and Frank Mason who had been standing in the smoking cabin staring upwards at the hostile 'plane, had no idea how much time had passed until Mr. Mason said:

"It's a quarter of an hour since the message went out, so it looks as though the luck's going to break our way after all."

"What message was that?" asked Alan quickly.

"A radio S O S," said Mr. Mason, with a cheerful smile. "And we've been flying this way and that so much that we are in about the same position as we were when the S O S went out."

A glance towards the coast of England proved to the two youngsters that this was true. They could still see, in the distance, the glistening white cliffs of Dover. The sun was still shining from the clear, blue sky, and everything seemed exactly the same as it had done when they had been glancing outside, and when they had seen the first bomb fall.

How long would this desperate battle go on?

Both lads felt the same as Mr. Mason—that if they only had a chance of fighting back it would not have been so bad, but absolutely helpless as they were, it was like being trapped. There was nothing at all they could do to defend themselves, and they could only rely on the skill of Captain Dennis at the controls, to get them out of the scrape.

"What I can't understand," said Alan, who was desperately anxious to talk about something in order to prevent himself from dwelling on the danger that was so near them, "is why on earth it should have happened?"

"It strikes me," said Frank putting his ideas into words for the first time, "that the people who are bombing us want to get rid of one of the passengers, and this is the only way they can do it."

The Flying Turk

"But surely it would have been easier for him to have done it in England?"

"That's right enough," said Frank, showing how deeply he had thought the thing out. "But supposing these people in the monoplane want to stop one of us from getting, say, to Marseilles? They might not have reached Croydon in time to stop the passenger embarking, but with a fast 'plane they could give chase and catch us up. It looks as though that's what's happened."

Alan nodded; Mr. Mason was looking down at his son with a strange expression in his eyes.

"That was well thought out," he admitted. "However—we can only hope that the day will come when we shall know whether you are right or wrong. I——"

And then he stopped.

For something flashed by the air-liner so close that it cast a quick shadow over the cabin, and it seemed to the three people in the smoking-room that they had only to stretch out their hands and they could touch it.

The seventh bomb!

The monoplane had managed to manœuvre itself into position again, and none of them could be sure whether the next bomb would miss them or not. Already they had been lucky; but it did not seem possible that their luck would last for ever.

And then suddenly the door of the pilots'

room opened, and the steward came hurrying along the passage, crying out as he came:

"Three Air Force machines are within a mile! They'll be here in less than twenty seconds, and I don't think we've anything more to worry about."

The relief which Frank Mason and Alan Blair felt was tremendous. There were gasps of relief also from the other passengers, and everyone in the *Cloud* seemed to feel much more light-hearted than they had done for the last twenty minutes. All of them stared out of their windows. By now the three Air Force machines were clearly visible.

A moment later Frank Mason exclaimed aloud.

"It's making off!" he cried.

He was right! Now they could see the streamlined monoplane flying away from them, towards the open sea. It seemed only a second later that the three battle 'planes passed them, racing in pursuit of the attacker. Somewhere in the skies, probably out of sight, a grim battle would be waged. But for the moment Frank and Alan had had excitement enough; now that the tension was eased, and they knew that they had escaped, there was only one question on their lips.

Who had committed that outrage, and which member of the passengers or crew had been the intended victim?

CHAPTER V

MARSEILLES

THE nine occupants of the air-liner could hardly realise that the terrible tension of the past quarter of an hour had really eased. Neither Alan Blair nor Frank Mason said a word, and Mr. Mason was sitting back in his seat, staring out of the cabin window towards the three 'planes that were fighting out their desperate battle in the air.

In the next cabin the three passengers who were unknown to the lads, felt the same reaction. They had behaved wonderfully well in the circumstances, but now one or two of them were trembling like men stricken with ague.

In the pilots' cabin the steward was leaning against the window, his hands at his eyes as though to shut out the sight of the fighters. Captain Dennis and his assistant felt very grim, but perhaps Dennis was the most self-possessed man in the 'plane.

All the time he had been trying so desperately to avoid the bombs, he had known which way he was flying, and in order to enable the rescue 'planes to reach him in time, he had flown in a zig-zag course back towards England.

Without any comment he now turned the air-liner and started flying again towards Marseilles.

He had hardly set the course before the door opened and Mr. Mason appeared.

Captain Dennis looked up with a grim smile.

"Two good youngsters of yours, sir."

"They did take it pretty well, didn't they?" said Mr. Mason. "You didn't do so badly yourself."

Dennis smiled.

"It's a long time since I had to do anything like that," he admitted, "and I don't mind saying that I was afraid we were done for. However—all's well that ends well!"

Mr. Mason nodded.

"Now I suppose you're making back to England and Croydon?"

Dennis shook his head.

"No need to do that, sir. The fact that we've had one spot of bother doesn't mean that we are going to have more. Of course I've radiod asking for an escort, just in case of trouble."

Mr. Mason's eyes narrowed.

"I suppose it isn't possible for you to turn back, Captain?"

Dennis looked puzzled, for although he would have been prepared for the question from any one of the other passengers, he had certainly not expected it from this courageous-looking man.

"I'm afraid not, sir, unless I had orders from headquarters. I've been in touch with them by radio all the time, of course, and the last order I had was to go ahead. Have you any particular reason for wanting to go back?"

Mr. Mason nodded grimly.

"If at all possible," he said, "I wanted to take the lads back. Because"—Mr. Mason drew a deep breath and his eyes did not leave Dennis,—"I'm very much afraid that *I* was the cause of that attack."

"*You* were!" Captain Dennis could not prevent himself from exclaiming. "What on earth makes you think that, sir?"

Mr. Mason shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a long story to tell you now," he said, "but I've been expecting an attack on my life for some time past. I had been led to understand that there was no more danger, and that was the only reason why I was taking my son and his friend to India. But it seems that the danger is as great as ever."

Captain Dennis leaned back in his seat.

"Do you seriously mean to suggest," he asked, "that someone deliberately tried to smash the 'plane in order to murder you?"

"That's exactly what I do mean," said Mr. Mason. "I'm sorry I can't explain more fully, Captain, but there it is. Had I suspected there was any likelihood of danger you can be quite sure that I would not have allowed the liner to

incur the slightest risk. But in view of the fact that I have been attacked, I do feel that the quicker I leave the liner the better."

Dennis nodded.

"All the same, Mr. Mason, I'm by no means sure that you're altogether right. If we went back to Croydon, how could this man who's trying to get you, know? He might believe that you're still in the *Cloud* and come after us again."

Mr. Mason's smile was very grim.

"The man I've got in mind," he said, "isn't the type to make mistakes like that. You can be quite sure, Captain, that there's another 'plane hanging about somewhere, and that the result of the attack is well known."

Captain Dennis exclaimed in surprise.

"You mean there's another 'plane near us now, and there's likely to be more trouble?"

"I wouldn't go as far as to say that," said Mr. Mason. "But I do feel that we shall be followed and whether I land at Marseilles or Croydon, it'll be known. The thing is that I've got to look after the youngsters, and I can do that much better in Croydon than I can at Marseilles."

Captain Dennis was convinced now that the other man was advising the reasonable course, and that he was right in what he said. On the other hand he was by no means sure that his headquarters would give him permission to fly back to England. All the same he promised to

get into touch with them by radio, and he carried out his promise immediately.

Less than three minutes later Mr. Mason learned that it was impossible for the *Cloud* to turn back. There was no proof, after all, that the *Cloud* was in further danger and the escort of 'planes which was to be sent out was considered a sufficient protection against the likelihood of further attack.

Alan Blair and Frank Mason had not the slightest idea of this conversation which was taking place between Mr. Mason and the chief pilot. Had they been in the cabin they would have been astonished at more than one thing. Not only would they have found it almost impossible to believe that they had been attacked by an enemy of Mr. Mason's, but they would have been fascinated by the discovery that it was possible to get in touch with England—or for that matter any place no matter how many thousands of miles away—by radio, and carry out what was, in effect, a conversation.

Not until later did they have an opportunity of learning this, and actually using the transmitting set themselves, hearing the reply to their questions coming back over the ether a few seconds later, through the receiving set.

But to Mr. Mason and the pilots, however, this miracle of modern science was an everyday thing and they thought nothing about it.

Captain Dennis looked grim.

"I'm sorry I can't do anything more. What will you do?"

"I've no choice," said Mr. Mason with a grim smile. "Of course I know that you can't help it, and that you've done everything possible. I'll take the lads to Marseilles and bring them back to London as soon as I can."

The Chief Pilot nodded.

"I can hardly believe that anyone would have gone to such lengths to kill you," he said, frankly.

Mr. Mason shrugged his shoulders.

"If you knew the fellow I had in mind," he said, "you'd be prepared to believe anything. However, I must go back and break the news to the lads."

He did not look forward to this prospect, but he was convinced that both Alan and Frank would be sensible. As it happened their tremendous disappointment at learning the trip to India was cancelled, was drowned in the realisation that the attack had been made against Frank's father. When he had explained—exactly the same as he had to Captain Dennis—they fully understood the position, and Alan said impetuously:

"I wish to goodness we could help you, Mr. Mason."

Frank's father chuckled.

"I expect you both feel like that," he said,

"but it's quite impossible. This man I'm fighting against is much too ruthless. Your lives would not be worth a moment's purchase."

Frank Mason was always reluctant to put many questions, but he did feel on this occasion he was justified in asking one or two. One thing was certain; his father would not hesitate to refuse to answer unless he considered it wise.

"Did you have any idea that the attempt was likely to come?" Frank asked, a little nervously.

Mr. Mason shook his head and looked straight at his son.

"It's too long a story to tell you now," he said, "but it goes back nearly two years. When I first went to India I managed to make an enemy of a certain Turk, who had been breaking the laws of Egypt and Turkey without any compunction. I was able to put the police on his trail, but the man himself escaped. He always threatened revenge, and several times in the past two years he has very nearly succeeded in getting it. In that time," added Mr. Mason, "I was particularly careful to avoid the man—whose name is Sud Ben Ali—but a few months ago when I was going across country on this medical research job I've told you about, he cropped up."

Mr. Mason stopped for a moment, and it seemed to the lads that he was looking at them and yet not seeing them. He seemed to be

thinking back over the period which he was explaining to the youngsters.

Neither Frank nor Alan interrupted, and Mr. Mason went on at last.

"There were three Englishmen and twenty natives in our expedition," he said, "and of course we were all fully armed—because every expedition must be in those wild parts. I want you to remember that there's a considerable distance between Turkey and Afghanistan, where I was at the time."

"Nearly a thousand miles, isn't it?" asked Frank.

"It's about a thousand miles as the crow flies," said Mr. Mason, "but it's certainly much more than that over the rocky mountain paths. You can imagine my surprise then when Sud Ben Ali suddenly appeared, with an armed force of about sixty men."

Mr. Mason stopped, this time because of the exclamations from the two lads. What ever else had been expected, the attack from this mysterious Turk with an armed force as strong as that had certainly not been in the lads' minds.

"He must be dreadfully anxious to kill you," said Alan Blair.

"He is—or he was," admitted Mr. Mason with a grim smile. "Anyhow, thanks to the fact that the other two white men with me were used to tribal warfare—they had both spent a

considerable time with the police force in India—we managed to beat the attackers off. And during the fight I was sure that Sud Ben Ali was killed. In fact, Colonel Bennett, who was with me, actually saw him lying amid the rocks, and although I didn't go near him—you must remember there were still twenty or thirty of his men sniping at us from behind big boulders—it certainly seemed beyond doubt that Ben Ali had passed out of this world."

"It would have been a good thing too," said Alan Blair feelingly.

Mr. Mason smiled.

"I'm inclined to agree with you," he admitted. "But I never like to feel that I've been responsible for killing a man. But as it was in self-defence no one at all could be blamed. Anyhow, when we finished the expedition and I got back to Karachi, this opportunity for coming to see you cropped up. Because I was convinced that there was no further danger from Sud Ben Ali I decided to give you a really good holiday to make up for the years that we've not seen each other."

"I suppose," said Frank Mason slowly, "that one of the reasons you did not come from India was that you were not afraid of attacks from this man?"

His father nodded, glad that his son was so understanding.

"I certainly realised it was possible that Sud

Ben Ali would follow me to England," he said, "and the very fact that he would travel from Turkey to Afghanistan proved beyond doubt that he was quite prepared to go any distance and to any trouble."

"Was he an educated man?" asked Alan Blair.

Mr. Mason nodded.

"He was educated at a famous English public school," he said, "and he can talk English practically as well as a native. Of course there's just the possibility that he is dead, and that these attacks come from someone who knew him well."

"I still can't understand," said Frank Mason, "why on earth anyone should go to so much trouble. After all you may have got Sud Ben Ali into hot water, but as he escaped he didn't suffer very much."

Mr. Mason chuckled.

"He suffered in this way," he said. "He was unable to return to his own home, and he knew he could look forward to spending the rest of his life as a fugitive from justice. Anyhow I'm absolutely certain that Ben Ali, or one of his colleagues, made that attempt to bomb us."

Mr. Mason had spoken with such certainty that neither of the lads could possibly doubt what he said. On the other hand, it seemed incredible that anyone should go to such terrible

lengths purely for revenge on one man. Alan Blair, not being Mr. Mason's son, did not feel that he was justified in asking any questions, but Frank said slowly, after a few moments' thought:

"Isn't there something else which they want from you? If Ben Ali himself was definitely still alive then it would be more easily understandable, but I can't imagine any relative or friend going to the lengths of trying to send a loaded air-liner crashing into the sea, simply to get one man."

Frank spoke rather hesitantly, for he did not feel too happy about raising any query on his father's words. On the other hand he was an outspoken lad and he found it very difficult not to put his thoughts into words.

Mr. Mason did not immediately reply. He leaned back in his seat while the *Cloud* winged its way across the skies towards Marseilles, eyeing his son steadily. Neither Alan Blair nor Frank Mason were thinking now about the trip. They had started off with a feeling that this was going to be the most wonderful adventure of their lives, and they had been prepared to study the land over which they were flying very thoroughly. But although they were now flying over the coast of France, the sea behind them and Dieppe, Rouen and Paris almost directly ahead of them, they thought of nothing but the strange tale that Mr. Mason had unfolded.

In the small cabin of the aeroplane in which they were sitting there seemed to be a breath of the East, a vision of a hot-blooded Turk who would be prepared to do anything to get his own way, a sudden insight into the savagery which was lurking in the East. Naturally both lads had read stories of the outrages and atrocities which the Turks and other near neighbours of Turkey had perpetrated from time to time, especially during and immediately after wars. But somehow they had always felt that such things were part of the past, and that in this modern world everyone was as civilised as the people in England.

Now they realised fully that in the East there were vast tracts as yet still unexplored, there were tribes who had not advanced a single year in several centuries, and that there were even men, educated though they were, who were actually savage and primitive at heart. Obviously Sud Ben Ali was such a man, and they wondered whether they would ever set eyes on him.

Of course there was still the possibility that he was dead—Colonel Bennett, of whom Frank's father had spoken, had actually seen the man lying as dead—and that certainly seemed likely. On the other hand there was just a possibility that Ben Ali had been severely wounded but had recovered from the effects of the bullets.

All these things flashed through their minds, not identical of course but in a very similar fashion, while Mr. Mason was deliberating on just how much he should tell them. Despite the fact that he had not seen his son for so long, he had absolute confidence in the youngster, and he believed that he could rely on him to react well to any emergency, and to do the right thing. On the other hand he was afraid that if he told the whole truth he would be laying both Frank and Alan open to danger which no one would be able to prevent.

He spoke at last, smiling a little grimly.

"There's something else," he assured them, "but it's something which I don't feel it's wise to tell you. Whether this man who attacked us to-day was inspired by Sud Ben Ali or by a relative, I'm convinced that he was striving purely and simply to prevent me from using some information which I have. But that's as much as I can tell you."

Neither Frank nor Alan made any comment, for they were both prepared to accept Mr. Mason's word. More than that they could now understand why he was so anxious to take them back to England. For their own part they could not resist the feeling that they would like to try conclusions with the attackers. There seemed a breath of romance and glorious adventure in the prospect of a battle with Sud Ben Ali or whoever had replaced him. On the

other hand they realised that there was little or no chance of Mr. Mason allowing them to take part in any affair which was likely to be of life or death. They knew that the best thing for them to do was to try and forget it.

Not that there would be much hope of that. Short though their acquaintance with the affair had been, they were convinced in their own minds that they would remember it until their dying day.

They had just finished their conversation when the steward came along with the coffee, and somehow or other from that moment onwards the tension seemed to ease. By now two aeroplanes had overtaken them and were flying above them, supplying an escort with which to make sure that there was no further attack on them.

Now the *Cloud* was flying over a comparatively flat stretch of country which ran between Paris and the French province of Nièvre. Here and there were small towns of interest which Mr. Mason pointed out to them, but the line of their flight was taking them over parts of France which were not particularly well known.

After about two hundred miles flying, however, they crossed the mountains in the province of Allier, and for some time flew practically straight along the course of the river which bore the same name.

From now onwards the country became a great deal more interesting. Beneath them stretched the hills and mountains, and they flew almost directly over Mount Dore, which was one of the tallest in France. This mighty peak towered over six thousand feet above the earth, or a height of nearly two miles.

Although they did not put it into words both lads were inclined to feel that after a short while the country over which they were flying became rather monotonous, and they realised that flying itself was not particularly exciting. Of course there would always be the wonderful feeling that they had made this trip in the air, but it was the fact that they had been flying from place to place at the colossal speed of two hundred miles an hour, the fact that everything beneath them seemed tiny and insignificant, which made the adventure so glorious.

Mount Dore had been on their right when they had flown past it and soon afterwards Mr. Mason said:

"We're now flying over the province of Heuta Loire, young 'uns."

Alan Blair laughed.

"I didn't dream there were so many provinces in France," he said.

"That shows you want to rub up your geography," smiled Mr. Mason.

Soon they were flying over the long mountain range that spread practically from the southern-

most point of France, starting from the province of Garonne and Aude and stretching right up into the province of Moselle, with, of course, occasional breaks. That part of the range over which they were flying was the Cevennes and they knew that when they were on the other side they would be very quickly in Marseilles.

Between moments when they were gazing down on the wide space of open country, and the towering mountains with their wooded slopes, both Frank Mason and Alan Blair were thinking of the same thing.

The aeroplane which had attacked them had been driven off, but they were by no means sure that it had been captured or forced down. Was it possible when they reached Marseilles there would be another attack?

The possibility that there would be one made them both feel excited and on edge. Even although Mr. Mason said nothing which even hinted at the possibility, they both felt that he, too, was prepared for anything when the great air-liner touched land again.

Would anything out of the ordinary happen? Or would their journey back to England be without incident? Only time, they knew, could tell.

CHAPTER VI

A SUSPICIOUS STRANGER

THE perfect flying weather which had followed the *Cloud* from England to France showed no sign of change when the great air-liner began to move towards the Marseilles air port. Frank and Alan had been delighted when Captain Dennis had sent a message through the steward asking them if they would care to watch him handle the 'plane for the descent.

They were watching his manœuvres at the controls closely, seeing the way in which he gradually pushed the joy-stick forward, and how he continually used the rudder bar in order to send the machine round in two or three narrowing circles. It took only a few minutes for them to drop from a height of twelve thousand feet to five hundred feet, and then the *Cloud* went downwards gradually, travelling at such a speed that it seemed impossible that Captain Dennis could pull it up in time to prevent it crashing into the hangars at the far end of the field.

This was the first time Frank Mason had landed from the air, and although he had read about such landings frequently he was surprised at the way in which the mechanics and aerodrome officials were running towards the

A Suspicious Stranger 63

machine, and he was fascinated to see the objects on the ground growing larger every second.

Suddenly they were flashing past a line of trees, and the smooth running of the air-liner altered abruptly. It was running along the ground now without swaying in either direction, and they could feel the thick rubber tyres bumping on the earth. When the throttle had been closed so that the speed of the machine was something under seventy miles an hour, Captain Dennis closed the throttle, cutting the engines off.

A few seconds later the *Cloud* came to a standstill, after taxiing for about a hundred yards.

Captain Dennis looked round with a smile.

"That's easy enough, isn't it?" he asked.

Frank Mason chuckled.

"I wouldn't like to try it myself," he said.

"You wouldn't have to unless you'd had a pretty sound training," said the pilot. "But I shouldn't be surprised if you proved you could handle it very well."

Frank was very pleased with this compliment which had been passed without any question and it was in a cheerful frame of mind that he stepped out of the air-liner in the wake of his father. Alan Blair was bringing up the rear.

It was easy to see that they were in a foreign country for there was something very different about the appearance of the men who were

now standing or moving about the machine. Mechanics had already gone to the engines to give them a quick look-over, thus making sure that they would be in perfect trim for the second stage of the flight. Other mechanics were already running a large hose pipe through which the fresh supply of petrol would be transferred from the air-field tanks to those of the liner.

It was not without a pang of disappointment that the two lads began to walk away from the machine. They were not yet ready to say good-bye to the two pilots, for Captain Dennis and his assistant were going over to the building to put in their usual report, and also to have some slight refreshment before they started the next hop of several thousand miles.

Mr. Mason was chatting with the pilot and with the manager of the air-field who had come to welcome them. The manager was speaking in English although his French accent was very marked.

Frank and Alan caught a word or two and they knew he was asking about the remarkable attack in the air. He was waving his hands about, and but for the seriousness of the subject both lads would have been forced to laugh at the comic picture which he presented.

They were perhaps two hundred yards from the air-liner when the two escort 'planes landed, their engines roaring until it seemed that the very ground was shaking. The pilots hurried in

A Suspicious Stranger 65

the wake of the men from the *Cloud*, and Mr. Mason stepped to the lads' side, asking them to stay near at hand, but not actually to mix with the crowd with whom he would be talking.

Alan looked smilingly at his friend.

"Well," he said, "it was better than nothing."

"It certainly was," admitted Frank. "But of all things to have happened that was the limit!"

"I had no idea that your father was such a go-getter," said Alan, with a chuckle.

"He certainly seems to have had some adventures," admitted Frank, and he could not keep a note of longing out of his voice.

In point of fact both lads were doing their utmost not to brood over the disappointment but it was not an easy job. They reached a large café which so far as appearance was concerned was very similar to a café in England. The waitresses were French, however, and for ten minutes the youngsters were amused at the girls' efforts to talk in broken English.

It was Alan Blair who saw the man enter the café.

With Frank he was sitting at a small table and coffee and sandwiches were in front of them. Mr. Mason or one of the others had obviously given instructions for the refreshment to be taken over. Mr. Mason himself was at the other side of the café sitting round a large table with Captain Dennis, the French manager and the pilots of the two escort 'planes.

There was no suggestion at all in the manner of the men who gathered about the table of trouble, and they seemed to have finished their discussion about the outrage. It was while he was glancing towards them that Alan saw the man.

He was a tall, swarthy-faced fellow, very thin and with a pair of dark, smouldering eyes. He did nothing which could have caused them alarm, but something in his expression as he glanced across at Mr. Mason made Alan frown.

He nudged Frank's arm.

"That fellow who's just come in is looking pretty nasty."

Frank glanced at the man quickly, making sure that it was not obvious he was regarding him. His reaction to the man's appearance was very much like that of Alan's. There was something about the man which both of them disliked intensely and it was certainly true that the man with the smouldering eyes was regarding Mr. Mason strangely.

He went quickly to a table between the lads' and Mr. Mason's, and they heard him order coffee in a rather thick voice. Then he leaned back smoking a long, brown cigarette—actually a cheroot—and to the lads it seemed that he was straining his ears to catch what the men were talking about.

Now and again Frank could hear, and it was obvious that the man would certainly be able to understand.

Mr. Mason's voice came suddenly.

"Of course I'm going straight back to London," he said. "It would be madness to take any other chances."

Alan and Frank felt a sudden surge of excitement, for as the words came they were watching the new-comer and they saw the way in which his eyes narrowed, and his lips curve in an unpleasant smile. It was as if he had learned something that had given him considerable satisfaction.

The French manager, whose voice was much more piercing than any of the others, spoke next.

"Perhaps it is as well, alas. It would not be as important perhaps, if our friends had managed to bring down that aeroplane."

The answering words were lost, but both Frank and Alan realised that the machine that had bombed them had managed to escape from its pursuers. They were not so much concerned with that, however, as they were with the expression on the stranger's face.

He was smiling widely, but there was something so unpleasant in his expression that Frank Mason felt afraid!

"I don't like the look of that customer," he whispered to Alan.

"I certainly don't," said Alan. "I—look! He's going already!"

The swarthy-faced man had only been in the

café for five minutes, and now he got up and walked quickly towards the door. He had not even waited to finish his coffee, for the lads could see that his cup was still half full.

For once it was Frank who thought more quickly than his friend.

"I'm going to follow him," he said, standing up abruptly. "You wait and tell Dad where I've gone."

Alan looked as though he would much rather have followed the stranger, but he made no protest, while Frank walked quickly out of the café.

None of the men at the large table noticed him going, but as soon as he had disappeared Alan wondered whether it was wise.

He decided suddenly to go and tell Mr. Mason immediately, and he stood up and hurried across to the other table.

It was as well he did so; had Frank Mason gone alone, with no one to follow him, he would probably not have lived another hour!

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There was no doubt in Frank's mind but that the swarthy-faced stranger was in some way connected with the attack on his father. He was so desperately anxious to try and find just where the man had come from that he did not hesitate for a moment to follow his man. He had no idea that he had been seen by the fellow,

A Suspicious Stranger 69

for when he reached the door the stranger was fifty yards away, walking towards the big gates of the air-field.

By that time Frank was half-way across the air-field but was beginning to wish he had asked Alan to come with him. Although there were dozens of people about, and although on every side he could hear the jabbering, high-pitched tone of the French people, he felt very much alone.

But now he had come so far he did not propose to turn back.

The swarthy-faced man reached the gates, and hurried towards the left. Had it been in England Frank Mason might have had some idea about what part of the town the man was going to, but in Marseilles he was quite at a loss. But he did see ahead of him the wide road, with the houses on either side, while in the other direction the road appeared to lead towards comparatively open country:

"He is going towards the town," Frank told himself. "I wonder whether I'll lose him?"

As he hurried on—the swarthy-faced man walked with such a long, raking stride that Frank had a hard job to keep pace with him—he was trying to remember what French he had learned at school. In the class-room he had been very successful, but he realised with a feeling of nervousness that he hardly understood a word that the French people were talking as he passed

them. His own French was not going to be much use in the circumstances.

He had not walked two hundred yards along the road, however, before the man he was following reached a large, closed car. A uniformed chauffeur was at the wheel, and next to him a second man whose face was just as dark as the fellow Frank had been following.

His quarry snapped a word to the chauffeur who jumped out immediately to open the door, and then stepped into the tonneau.

The car was pointing towards Frank and it began to move immediately, so quickly that Frank hardly realised it had started before it was level with him.

And then suddenly it pulled up with a grinding of brakes and to Frank Mason's tremendous surprise the man next to the chauffeur jumped out and came straight for him.

For a moment Frank was so taken aback that he had hardly any idea what to do. But it was not long before he realised that trouble was coming and that this fellow was deliberately after him.

It seemed that the anger and disgust which Frank Mason had felt after the bombing burst all bounds at that moment. It was not quite obvious that these fellows had had something to do with it, and without a murmur he clenched his fists and sailed into the man. Had he been feeling in a cooler frame of mind he would have

A Suspicious Stranger 71

realised this was the last thing the others had expected. Frank Mason looked sturdy, but he was after all only a lad, and the other was a full-grown man. But plenty of training for rugby and cricket, and practice most days in the school gymnasium with the gloves, had made Frank as hard as nails. He lammed right and left into the dark-faced attacker, smashing one clenched fist on the fellow's nose and the other into his solar plexus.

The dark-faced man had made one ineffectual effort to hit Frank and had then been prepared to use his feet. But that tremendous blow in the stomach doubled him up and quick as a flash Frank Mason saw his chance.

The fellow's chin jutted forward, and Frank used his right fist for a tremendous upper cut which literally lifted the man off his feet and sent him crashing back against the car.

All this had happened so quickly that the driver and the tall man at the rear of the car had hardly realised what was happening. Less than thirty seconds had passed between the moment when the attacker was jumping towards Frank, and the moment when his head cracked against the car window and he slumped down to the road unconscious.

As he watched the fellow falling, Frank Mason stood dead still, his fists clenched and prepared for any kind of trouble. He knew there were two courses open to him; first that he should

go bare-headed for the chauffeur and take a chance of getting the visitor to the aerodrome a prisoner; second that he should take to his heels and run. Nine lads—and in fact nine men—out of ten would have taken the latter course and certainly they would have been wise. But Frank Mason was not of the type who would give anything up easily. He was filled with the conviction that whatever happened he must prevent the man who had visited the aerodrome from escaping. He was convinced also that if only he could force the fellow to stay in the car until his father arrived then the mystery of the bombing attack would be settled.

Consequently he hesitated only a few seconds and then jumped towards the car. The chauffeur, a much smaller fellow than the man who was now crumpled in a heap of the floor, looked scared, and began to slide out of his seat away from Frank.

But the thick voice of the man in the tonneau pulled the youngster up sharply.

There was no mistaking the meaning behind the words, as they were rasped out:

“Put your hands up, young English fool!”

And Frank Mason standing dead still found himself staring at the man who was outlined against the window and into the ugly muzzle of an automatic pistol!

CHAPTER VII

A ROAD CHASE

FRANK MASON could hardly think for the few moments that followed the man's words. Of course he should have realised the danger which threatened from the fellow, but somehow he had not expected to find himself faced with a gun on the road which led from the aerodrome.

But there it was—and the expression in the stranger's eyes was malevolent to a degree. There was not the slightest doubt but that if Frank Mason refused to obey the other's orders he would be shot.

It was all Frank could do to prevent himself from taking his life in his hands and leaping at the stranger. Only that sound common sense which was part of him saved him from throwing his life away. He did not move backwards or forwards, and he raised his hands slowly and reluctantly, eyeing the gunman all the time.

The little brown-faced driver had seen the way in which the tables had been turned and now he contrived to make it appear that he had been intending to attack and not retreat. He hurried round the front of the car and before Frank could help himself the driver had punched

him viciously in the ribs. The man with the gun smiled unpleasantly.

"That's enough, Garat. Boy—you will come into the car."

The fact that the man spoke in that stilted English seemed to give an added eeriness and menace to his words. Frank Mason hesitated for a split-second but he quickly realised that the only possible thing he could do was to obey.

None-the-less he stepped to the car as slowly as he could, despite the fact that the driver was pushing him all the time. The man with the gun opened the door, still training his automatic on the youngster's chest. A moment later the driver pushed Frank violently and the lad sprawled head-first into the spacious interior of the car.

Then things happened quickly.

The brown-faced man snapped an order in a foreign language, the driver banged the door and raced round to the driving seat. Frank had banged his head against one of the seats and for a moment or two he had been feeling muzzy. Before his head had properly cleared the car was in motion.

Frank struggled to his feet, aware all the time of the gun which was pointed at him. The lean-faced stranger was sitting back in his corner, and as he looked at him, Frank was unable to avoid glancing through the small window at the rear of the car.

What he saw made his heart leap.

Not two hundred yards away was a large, open car which was tearing along in their wake. That in itself would have meant little; but he recognised his father sitting next to the driver of the car—a man whom Frank had never seen before—while in the rear were the two pilots of the *Cloud's* escort planes, and Alan Blair, whose fair hair was blowing wildly in the wind created by the racing car.

It was impossible for Frank Mason to prevent himself from showing something of the excitement which flooded through him. A smile flashed across his face and the man with the gun rapped something in that foreign tongue, and then snapped in English:

“What is it?”

Frank Mason proved in that moment that his courage was of the highest. He was fully prepared for the crook to lose control of himself, and any moment he was afraid that a bullet would hum towards him. But he could not keep back the words of triumph which surged through him.

“My father!” he snapped, “and several others. You’ll regret this!”

For answer the man smashed out his left clenched fist. Frank received the blow beneath the belt, and an excruciating pain shot through him. He gasped and doubled up, almost collapsing into a seat, while the man who had

struck that vicious blow leant forward and opened the window which separated the tonneau from the driving seat.

"Faster, Garat, faster! We are being followed!"

The little driver may have been afraid of physical injury, but he could certainly handle a high-powered car. Moreover he proved himself to be very quick-thinking and the words had hardly left the other's lips when he pressed viciously on the accelerator. The speedometer needle of the car leapt from forty miles an hour to sixty.

Frank Mason realised that the car had suddenly accelerated, dazed though he was by the foul blow from the man in the rear of the car with him. As he gradually recovered he saw that the swarthy-faced stranger was leaning forward tensely in his seat, craning round towards the road behind them.

If Frank himself could not stand up in order to see what was happening, he could at least be sure from the other's manner that his father's car was gaining.

Help was in sight—and he needed little telling that the men who were following the big car would stop at nothing to rescue him.

He was sure, also, that the swarthy-faced man would not do him any serious harm at the moment. If anything happened to Frank

Mason in the car, and its occupants were afterwards caught and taken to the police, they would be punished very severely for causing any physical injury.

These thoughts pierced Frank's mind as he struggled to a sitting position, and it did a great deal to help from falling a victim to panic. It would have been very easy for him to have lost control of himself. When his captor did glance at him, the expression in the man's smouldering eyes was so venomous that Frank was quite prepared to believe the other would have gladly murdered him!

Any further proof that his father was mixed up in a strange, murderous business, was unnecessary. The bombing had been a dastardly affair, but it was obvious that the men who had organised the attack were by no means beaten, although the one attack had been unsuccessful. But for the moment the one thing that really mattered was the issue of this road chase.

The saloon car in which Frank was riding was now racing along at a speed of over seventy miles an hour, swerving in and out of the oncoming traffic, breaking every rule of the road, whirling round corners on two wheels, until it seemed impossible that there could be any other ending but a smash.

Frank was fully prepared for a collision at almost any moment, but the possibility did not

worry him. The only thing that mattered was that the rescue party would overtake the crooks, and if in order to do so it was necessary for a smash he was prepared to take whatever injury might come to him.

From the expression in the other's eyes—still he dared not look out of the window, for the crook's gun was very threatening—he was still convinced that the chase was a close one, and for all he knew the pursuers' car was only a few hundred feet behind them.

The effect of that foul blow was gone now and every nerve in Frank's body tingled with excitement and expectancy. Through the dividing window he could see the driver crouching over the wheel, his teeth clenched tightly, his lips parted a little. Now and again the man glanced up into the driving mirror, and each time he seemed to grip the wheel more tightly, which was proof again that the pursuers were gaining on them.

As the seconds flew by, and the great car roared on, each of its eight powerful cylinders beating in a gigantic rhythm, it was almost impossible for Frank Mason to keep in the seat into which he had hauled himself.

Suddenly he discovered that by screwing his head round he could just see into the driving mirror. Leaning a little towards the left he could catch an occasional glimpse of his father's car as they turned corners.

It was no more than twenty yards behind them!

Frank's heart leapt. He knew that the chances of the crook getting away with him were very few now, and almost any moment he expected the touring car to overtake them. Still the saloon car was tearing along at seventy miles an hour and the driver was trying to get even more out of it. But the end of that sinister chase along the French roads was inevitable.

Or so Frank thought until he glanced at the crook again, and he saw what the man was doing.

Ignoring Frank—whose inaction had apparently convinced the other fellow that there was nothing to fear from him, he was staring out of the rear window, the gun in his hand. He raised the gun slowly, taking careful aim. Frank Mason had a terrible fear as he realised what was going to happen.

The swarthy man was about to fire at the pursuers, and if a bullet struck the driver, or one of the front tyres of the other car, disaster must come.

Frank had hardly seen what was going to happen before the man touched the trigger.

A stab of flame nearly a foot long went out, there was a sharp *hiss* as the bullet left the automatic, which was fitted with a silencer, and in front of Frank's eyes a small hole leapt into the safety glass of the rear window. The bullet's

momentum was stopped by the glass, but a second followed it, making the hole big enough for the man to fire through without trouble.

For a third time the flames stabbed out, a third time a bullet hummed towards the pursuer's car, and this time Frank knew that it would be touch and go.

He had only just time to realise what was happening, but now he saw that unless he did something there was more than an even chance of his father and the others being swept into disaster. Without thinking of his own danger, he leapt upwards.

The man with the gun must have had an abnormal sense of hearing, for as Frank moved he swung round and crashed his left fist towards Frank's face. More by luck than judgment Frank dodged it, and then he thudded into his man.

The one great fear in his mind was that the man would shoot at him, and he knew that at close quarters like these it would be practically impossible for him to save himself. But the force of the impact sent the gun flying out of the crook's hand.

It was just the chance that Frank Mason wanted. Now he knew that it was a matter of strength against strength, and somehow he was convinced that he would have no trouble in beating his man.

At close quarters as they were he crashed his

fists into the fellow's chest and face, taking blow for blow but hardly noticing them. Then the other sagged back in a corner, his nose and lips swollen, and Frank thought for a moment that the triumph was his.

And then he realised that the man was foxing.

Frank drew back a foot or two, and as he did so the man shot his hand forward like lightning towards the gun which was lying in the opposite corner of the seat.

With a sharp cry Frank went after him. The man's long powerful fingers closed round the butt of the gun but before he could turn it on Frank the youngster had that wrist fast in a grip of steel.

The man touched the trigger swiftly, and a bullet sped out, burying itself in the upholstery. Now the fight was even grimmer than ever before, and Frank was beginning to feel that he could not last a great deal longer.

He was sweating all over, his arms were feeling dreadfully tired and there was a mist in front of his eyes. That furious strength which had been given him for the first few moments of the fight was going, and the superior power of the crook was telling its inevitable tale.

But Frank hung on like a leech, and the two continued to struggle furiously, while the saloon car roared along the open country road—they were well out of Marseilles now—and the driver

crouched at his wheel with his face set more grimly than ever.

And then suddenly the thing happened.

Frank Mason heard the roar of the engine, but for a moment he did not realise what it was. Then suddenly out of the side window he saw the touring car with its crowd of occupants creeping up. The nose of the car was now in the front of the rear of the saloon, and foot by foot it gained. Soon the two cars were running practically level, and the road was only just wide enough for them. What would happen if a car came in the opposite direction? Frank Mason dared not think.

With a sudden fury he crashed his fists one after the other into his enemy's face. The crook sagged back, taken by surprise, and for a moment he was outed! A fierce rush of triumph surged through Frank Mason, and he snatched the gun from nerveless fingers. His one idea was to force the driver to pull up, in order that there would be no danger of a smash between the two cars, but then he saw what was happening.

For a moment he could hardly believe it possible.

One of the men in his father's car, a pilot of one of the escort 'planes, was standing on the running board, and he was preparing to leap from one car to the other! That any man dared try such a feat of agility and strength

seemed incredible. The two cars were racing neck and neck, only a foot away from each other, so that a slight miscalculation on the part of either driver must send them crashing into each other. They were travelling over seventy miles an hour and if the man on the running board missed his footing, the only possible result would be death.

Frank Mason drew a deep breath as he watched, every eye in the touring car was fixed on the dare-devil pilot, even the swarthy-faced crook whom Frank had temporarily knocked out was staring at the man in fascination.

And then, without hesitation, the airman jumped.

CHAPTER VIII

A PRISONER

FRANK MASON saw the whole scene enacted in front of his eyes, and afterwards he thought time and time again of it, marvelling at the courage of a man who would dare to make such a venture. He saw the pilot, a tall, lean fellow whose face even then was set in a smile, saw him move like lightning, stand for a second with one foot on the running board of the touring car and one on the saloon, grab at one of the door handles and then haul himself to safety! It was over—only a few seconds, but a few seconds of the most concentrated action that Frank had ever seen or expected.

Now the airman was standing on the running board of the saloon, and he looked cool and capable. He was still smiling and Frank Mason could see that he was a handsome, dashing-looking fellow, with clear-cut features and a pair of wide grey eyes. He seemed as much at home on the running board of the car, with the possibility of being crushed at any moment present all the time, as he would have been walking along an ordinary road.

He had one hand clutching the door handle, and with the other he waved quickly to Frank, obviously to give the youngster confidence.

And then he wrenched open the door leading to the driver's seat, slid in and banged the door. He was saved—and the end of this chase was no longer in doubt.

The little driver glanced quickly at the man who had jumped from nowhere it seemed, and his face was a picture of fear and dismay. Through the dividing window Frank could see the gun which gleamed in the rescuer's hand, and he saw his lips move although he could not hear the words.

The result of the order, however, was sufficient to tell him what it had been.

For the saloon began to slacken pace, the touring car passed it, and then the driver wrenched at his brakes.

At the same moment the swarthy-faced gunman whose entry into the café had started this desperate road chase, realised that the odds were now reversed and the chances were against him. Frank had the gun, but the man took a chance that the youngster would be too scared to use it. He wrenched at the on-side door of the saloon, pushed it open and leapt out.

Everything had happened so quickly that Frank Mason hardly realised what had happened before the fellow was staggering on the grass verge which ran alongside the road. But it did not take long for the youngster to recover himself. Now he leapt in the escaped man's wake, the gun in his hand. As he reached *terra-firma* he shouted:

86 The Flying Turk

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

Whether the man heard him or not he could not say. He did know that the fellow took no notice of him but started to run towards a gap in the four-foot hedge which lined the road. If he managed to get through there was just the possibility that he would escape, and Frank Mason realised it.

He did not hesitate, but he levelled his gun.

It was the first time in his life that he had used a fire-arm of any kind, and for a moment it seemed almost too much to pull the trigger in order to injure a fellow human being. But the moment of hesitation soon passed and he touched the trigger of the gun.

The flames stabbed out, there was a slight quiver that ran up Frank's arm, and then so quickly that there had seemed no time for the bullet to travel, the running man uttered a high-pitched cry and fell forward on his face!

Frank had made a hit!

He was breathing hard now, heedless of the men behind him, wondering only whether the swarthy-faced man was badly hurt. He had fired at the man's legs, but he was by no means sure that the bullet had gone where he wanted it to.

But as he reached him the fallen man was struggling to get to his feet, and he knew that no great damage had been done. Moreover the swarthy-faced man was grabbing at his shin and Frank saw from the jagged tear in his

trousers that the bullet had pierced the calf of his leg, and had come out at the front.

Whatever else the fellow had courage. As Frank reached him he made a big effort to kick out with his uninjured leg, trying to bring the youngster down. Frank skipped over it quickly, and his face was very grim as his gun pointed at the man's chest.

"Keep still!" he snapped.

But it was obvious that the crook had shot his bolt. His face was twisted in rage but he relaxed and made no further effort to kick the youngster. Even had he done so the effort would have been futile, for Mr. Mason and the other pilot reached them, running hard all the time.

"Thank heavens you're safe!" cried Mr. Mason as he pulled up. "Good work, old son."

Frank was feeling so tired now that the reaction had set in that all he could do was to grin rather foolishly. Automatically he slipped the gun into his pocket, and the other flier—a much shorter man than the fellow who had leaped from one car to the other—chuckled.

"You mean to be prepared in case of another emergency," he said.

Frank smiled again, and then—afterwards he could have kicked himself—he simply sat down heavily on the ground. His knees had wobbled so much that they had refused to hold him.

It was Alan Blair who saw more clearly what happened in the next few moments.

In the rear of the touring car Alan Blair had been filled with a dread that Frank would be found badly injured or dead, and when the touring car had flashed past the other he had seen his friend alive and apparently uninjured, to his tremendous delight. And then he had seen the way in which Frank had leapt after the escaped crook, and he had jumped out and followed in the wake of Mr. Mason and the pilot.

Mr. Mason was giving Frank a hand, and the stocky pilot looked at Alan.

"Will you grab this fellow's legs?" he asked.

Alan realised that he was going to help carry the crook towards the cars, and he nodded quickly. With the airman holding the injured man's shoulders and Alan his ankles they walked the few yards back to the cars, and the wounded crook was put into the rear of the saloon with the airman next to him, sitting with a gun in his hand.

The little driver was standing by, shivering with fear. The dare-devil pilot, also with a gun in his hand, urged the man into the rear of the tourer, and Alan sat next to him. Frank and Mr. Mason crowded into the saloon, and the two cars went a little way along the road, turning at the first opportunity, and then heading back towards the aerodrome.

By now Frank Mason was beginning to feel more himself; and he felt more than a little

ashamed at his weakness. Mr. Mason told him not to be foolish, and Frank was more than pleased at the fact that his father and the airmen apparently considered that he had acquitted himself satisfactorily.

Actually the men were astonished at the pluck which Frank had shown, and in a slightly lesser degree, Alan Blair. Although they had been faced with danger which would have made many fully-grown shiver with fear, neither Frank nor Alan had shown the slightest anxiety and even now they seemed prepared to tackle the job again.

Frank was amazed as the moments went by and they were still a long way from any sign of a big town. He uttered his thoughts aloud and Mr. Mason chuckled.

"We're only going at a steady forty," he said, "and most of the journey in the other direction was round about seventy."

"How far did we travel?" asked Frank.

"Pretty well twenty-five miles," said Mr. Mason.

Frank whistled in surprise, for things had been so grim that he had been running away with the idea that they had only covered a couple of miles. Now they passed through one or two straggling French villages which he had certainly not noticed on the other journey. He was more surprised than ever when practically half an hour had passed before they reached the out-

skirts of Marseilles, and the two cars turned into the wide gateway of the aerodrome.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Frank.

Mr. Mason looked thoughtful.

"Before we turn your friend over to the police," he said, "we're going to see if we can get some information from him. I don't recognise him, although he is undoubtedly a Turk."

"He is, by Jove!" exclaimed Frank. "I thought there was something odd about him."

"There's something odd and there's something bad," commented Mr. Mason grimly. "Anyhow we'll see if we can get him to talk, although he doesn't look the type who's likely to give much away. On the other hand," went on Mr. Mason, "the driver is so scared that he'll probably tell anything he knows."

"The trouble is," said Frank Mason shrewdly, "he may not know a great deal."

"That's why I'm thinking," agreed his father. "Anyhow we'll soon see."

The manager of the aerodrome, who knew the pilots well, promised to put a room in the aerodrome building at the Englishmen's disposal. Into this room the wounded prisoner was carried, and the little driver forced at the point of a gun. The mechanics and other people at the aerodrome stared in surprise at the tattered and dishevelled-looking party, and before long quite a crowd of excited, chattering

people were gathering outside the doors of the building.

Just how it had been arranged Frank did not know, but apparently the manager had already checked things up with the local gendarmerie, and half a dozen sturdy gendarmes in their comparatively gay uniforms soon had the crowd on the move.

For a few moments Frank was telling himself that the interrogation was going to take place without him being present and although he was disappointed he was prepared to admit that it was probably wiser that the men should negotiate it themselves. A few minutes later, however, Mr. Mason and the pilots came out of the room, all of them smiling. The aerodrome manager turned the key in the door and handed it to Mr. Mason.

"You will go back when it pleases you," he said with a flashing smile. "If there is anything else you would like me to do, Mr. Mason, I am at your command."

With another wide smile and a sharp, jerky bow, the portly little manager turned away from the others and went out to continue the business of the aerodrome. Frank and Alan Blair looked at the two pilots and Mr. Mason in startled surprise.

"Have they talked already?" Frank asked.

Mr. Mason chuckled as he shook his head.

"We're going to let both of them stay in there for half an hour and get properly worried

before we tackle 'em," he said. "A little of peace and quiet won't do them any harm."

Frank and Alan saw the force of this and they were relieved at the fact that the questions had not been asked without their being present. Frank felt a little nervous as he asked:

"Will you let us be there when you tackle the blighters?"

Mr. Mason glanced at the other two men, his eyes smiling.

"I think perhaps they deserve it," said the dare-devil man who had made the jump from one fast moving car to the other.

"It's an idea," admitted his companion.

"All right, then," said Mr. Mason. "If you think it's worth it we'll let you come."

Neither Frank nor Alan hesitated to show their pleasure, and they were looking forward a great deal to the coming interrogation. For the moment Mr. Mason carried out introductions to the fliers.

"This is Mr. Martin Johnson," he said, indicating the lean, dashing man, whose smile was as bright as ever. "Otherwise known as Ace Johnson——"

Neither Frank nor Alan could repress an exclamation of surprise. Now Frank told himself there had always been something rather familiar about the handsome features of the man who had crashed into the saloon, and he knew now just what it had been. Ace Johnson was one of the most famous figures of British

flying. He had been a member of the British Air Force, had taken part in most of the big races, including the Schneider Cup, and had flown from England to Australia in four days. He was practically as famous in Australia and on the Continent as he was in England.

Not for a moment had they ever dreamed of the possibility of seeing the flying ace face to face, and for a moment they could hardly speak.

But Ace Johnson chuckled, proving that he was by no means affected by the fame which he had justly earned. He shook hands firmly with each lad, and then Mr. Mason introduced the second flier.

Now that they were able to see this man more closely, they saw that he was a chubby, smiling fellow with a snub nose, a pair of twinkling blue eyes and a head of curly, dark brown hair.

"This is Kit Warren," explained Mr. Mason.

Kit Warren, as the boys knew, was Ace Johnson's companion on his record flights and his fame was only a little less than that of the other man's. Even without the astonishing adventures of the morning an introduction to such famous fliers as these would have been something for the two youngsters to remember as long as they lived. It was a remarkable fact that neither Kit Warren nor Ace Johnson showed the slightest sign of side, and they were by no means reluctant to express their admiration of

the way in which Frank and Alan had acted.

All five of them went into the café for a second time for coffee. Frank had not realised just how much he had needed it, but after he had drunk the coffee he felt a new man.

Mr. Mason eyed him thoughtfully.

"Well, young 'un," he said. "I don't quite know what to say. One thing is certain—if you and Alan had not decided that that fellow was worth watching he would have taken a message to his chief, and some delightful plan for looking after me would probably have been arranged. We'll know better in half an hour's time whether we can hope for any information, but I've got more than an idea that we're on Sud Ben Ali's track."

"And I——" began Ace Johnson, but he stopped suddenly. For the door of the café opened, and suddenly Alan Blair shouted:

"Look out!"

The others swung round towards the door, and with one accord dropped behind the table, for a short, thick-set man was standing in the doorway, an automatic pistol in each hand! He touched the triggers one after the other and a stream of bullets rapped out, crashing into the wall behind where the five had been sitting. It happened so quickly that it was almost impossible for them to realise it.

And then when the man's bullets were exhausted, he slammed the door, and for a moment a stark silence reigned in the café.

CHAPTER IX

MORE TROUBLE!

FRANK MASON and Alan Blair knew what it was to move fast but they had never seen anyone tread on the gas as Ace Johnson and Kit Warren did the moment the door closed behind the sharp-shooter. It seemed that the two airmen were hardly on their feet before they reached the door. Ace was a few feet ahead of his friend, but he had to pause to pull the door open and they both disappeared at the same time. Mr. Mason was not far behind them and the two lads had to bring up the rear. As they reached the door, they saw the two airmen in pursuit of the gunman, but at the same moment they realised there was little or no chance of their catching him.

For two or three men seemed to spring from nowhere and flung themselves at Ace and Kit!

The next moment the two airmen were mixed up in a whirling, ferocious *mêlée*, their cries echoing about the air-field. Frank and Alan piled into the scrap without hesitation.

Everything was forgotten in those few minutes, even the fact that they had started out in pursuit of the crook. The three men who had joined in the attack were reinforced by

several others and for a few seconds it seemed uncertain which way the battle would end. The remarkable fact that such a mass attack could have been staged in the great airport did not matter at the moment. What did matter was the fact that all five of them were battering their fists at the attackers, men were staggering back, one or two were felled by tremendous blows, and the free fight seemed as though it would never end!

Frank Mason was in the thick of the fray, but he was sent flying by a tremendous blow that took him on the side of the chin. He thudded to the ground and his head banged against the hard earth.

For the third time that day he was dazed, and while he was on the ground the fight was over.

The gendarmerie rushed up, two of them firing rifles in the air. The attackers seemed to realise that the moment had come for them to stop, and with one accord they took to their heels and ran.

Until that moment Alan Blair had been the only one of his party to escape without a serious blow. Mr. Mason had received a clout on the back of his head with a length of rubber, and although he was still on his feet he was temporarily dazed. Ace Johnson had had his legs swept from under him, and as he had thudded to the ground he had banged his head and was

in just as bad a state as the others. Kit Warren had also been floored in the same way as Mr. Mason.

But Alan Blair's diminutive size had enabled him to dodge in and out of the *mêlée* like a hornet, and his blood was up. He began to chase after one of the attackers, a broad-shouldered ruffian who would have made two Alans and left a little to spare.

Despite that disparity in their sizes Alan Blair caught up with the man, and made a plucky effort to send him off his feet.

Alan simply followed the rules of Soccer and flung himself in a shoulder charge at his burly opponent. The man himself actually staggered, taken by surprise and on one foot, but a second of the ruffians rushed to the rescue and knocked Alan flying.

As the youngster hit the ground the whole air-field was like bedlam. Mechanics and officials were running and shouting, the gendarmes were going mad—or so it seemed—and the only silent people on the place were the battered members of Mr. Mason's party and the five men who were running hell-for-leather towards the sides of the air-field.

All but one of the men managed to make a get-away.

This was an astonishing fact when it was realised that there must have been fully fifty people in pursuit, but afterwards it was realized

that there had been too many men trying to stop the attackers' get-away. When, some ten minutes later, a sore-headed and rueful Mr. Mason arrived again at the club-house with the two fliers and the two lads, he said quickly:

"The brute with the gun got away all right."

"Who was the fellow that we did catch?" asked Frank Mason, whose jaw was swollen where he had been clouted.

"I don't know yet," said Mr. Mason, "but he looked like an ordinary French ruffian. The gendarmes will know more about that—I don't feel like tackling them at the moment."

Frank and Alan could easily understand why the older man said that. For the gendarmes had proved to be as excitable as anyone else on the air-field, and even Mr. Mason's comparatively fluent French made no headway at all against the rapid provincial accent of the local police.

But another five minutes brought a gendarme—obviously the equivalent of the English sergeant—hurrying towards them.

The man forced his way through the crowd of excited people who had gathered about the café, and were remarking in audible tones that the mad English were behaving even worse than usual. He brought himself up to a stop with a sharp click of his heels and a military salute, while he appeared to glare at Mr. Mason.

Frank and Alan found it difficult to prevent

themselves from laughing, despite the circumstances.

The sergeant was a short, tubby little man with a ferocious red face and a pair of waxed moustaches which poked out like daggers on each side of his nose. Even in repose his face would have been comical, but his flush, his dishevelled hair and the cap which was stuck on the back of his head and liable to fall off at any moment, made him indescribably funny.

Obviously he had been one of the many gendarmes who had been hard at work outside, and he was short-winded. To make his appearance even more comical he started to talk in the quaintest broken English that either lad had ever heard.

"You Monsieur Mason?—Yes! The villain—I haf heem! You will come wit me, *mais oui*?"

Mr. Mason stood up immediately.

"Of course, mon capitaine," he said in French, somewhat to the lads' disappointment.

The sergeant of the gendarmes was delighted, however, to find that the mysterious and mad Mr. Mason could talk his own language reasonably well, and with Ace Johnson at his side Mr. Mason went off in the fellow's company.

Kit Warren, whose merry blue eyes were twinkling even now, glanced at the lads.

"This is a pretty kettle of fish," he said. "You fellows are having a proper holiday, aren't you?"

The Flying Turk

"It's almost as good," Alan admitted, "as if we'd actually started on the way to India."

"Even in India," said Frank quickly, "I doubt whether we'd have had quite so much fun."

Kit Warren flung back his head and laughed heartily.

"Fun's one word for it," he admitted, "although lots of people would call it something stronger."

Frank smiled a little.

"I've often been in a worse scrap at school," he admitted, "but that shooting was pretty unexpected, wasn't it?"

Kit Warren grew sober.

"It's an amazing business," he admitted. "Of course I know now that Mr. Mason was the intended victim in that bombing attack, and these blighters certainly mean to get him if they can. It doesn't seem to worry him a great deal I will say."

Alan Blair answered, for Frank Mason did not feel called upon to make any comments about his father.

"I don't think anything would worry Mr. Mason much," Alan said cheerfully. "Do you know the story?"

"You mean about Sud Ben Ali?" asked Kit Warren.

Both Alan and Frank were suprised to learn that the airman knew the name of Mr. Mason's enemy and they revealed that surprise in no

uncertain manner. Kit Warren smiled, and told them that the whole report of the affair in India had been handed over to the British Army in India at the time when he and Ace Johnson had been in Karachi, during one of their periodical record flights.

"And it so happened," added Kit Warren, "that Ace and I were in London at the Croydon Aerodrome when the radio came through about your spot of bother. We were too late getting up to have a scrap with the attackers, so we let some Air Force 'planes do that job while we tried to look after you."

"So you're not here officially—I mean for the Government or the Air Line?" asked Frank.

"No," admitted Kit Warren. "We're here purely as private citizens and it strikes me we're going to have some fun."

Frank Mason broke in quickly.

"Who's calling it fun now?" he demanded. "Anyhow, don't you think it's finished yet?"

"I don't think it's finished by a long way," admitted Kit Warren, and despite his smile he was looking serious. "But I don't know there's anything I can tell you, I—but here come the others."

Kit broke off as Mr. Mason and Ace Johnson entered the café, which it seemed had temporarily become their headquarters. The fierce yet comical-looking gendarme was missing, and Mr. Mason explained as soon as he reached the table.

"The man who was caught," he said, "is a water rat—one of the ruffians who lurk in odd corners of Marseilles and give the seaport such a bad name. The same kind of man as we might find in the East End of London."

"You mean," said Alan Blair quickly, "that he's not one of Sud Ben Ali's people?"

Mr. Mason shook his head.

"He certainly is not. He's pretty scared at the moment, and he told our friend the sergeant that he and four of his friends had been approached by the fellow with the gun to create a disturbance. It looks as though our gunman wanted to make sure of a get-away whether his attack failed or otherwise, and in order to manage it he employed these local ruffians."

Ace Johnson was looking more serious than the youngsters had ever seen him.

"They're certainly out to cause trouble," he admitted. "If you take my tip, Mr. Mason, you'll make back for England just as soon as you can. These French police are very good in their way, but if there's going to be trouble it's going to be much better for you to meet it in England than it is over here."

Mr. Mason nodded.

"I'm going to telephone London in a few minutes," he said, "and then as soon as we've tackled the other two prisoners we'll get away. Have you got room for passengers in your planes?"

"I daresay we could manage it," admitted Ace Johnson.

He affected not to notice the excitement which gleamed in the eyes of Frank and Alan, who succeeded in forgetting what had happened only a short while ago in their anticipation of a flight with such famous airmen as Ace Johnson and Kit Warren. So intrigued were they that they hardly noticed Mr. Mason get up and walk across to a doorway which led inside the big building. They were desperately anxious to ask questions, but they had no desire to worry the fliers too much. But Alan could not prevent himself from starting the ball rolling, and for the next ten minutes they were plying Ace and Kit with question after question about their many record flights.

The two airmen talked cheerfully and without showing the slightest sign of side or condescension. In fact it would have been easy for Frank Mason and Alan Blair to imagine that they were talking to youngsters of their own age. Time passed very quickly, and then an interruption came in the arrival of the manager with an austere-looking man in uniform.

This was the Captain of the Police who had come to the aerodrome in view of the disturbance which had been reported.

He spoke in excellent English to Ace Johnson and it was soon obvious that his rather austere manner was no clue to his nature. He was

friendliness itself, and after asking one or two questions he pulled a chair from a table and sat down.

"Mr. Mason will be here shortly I suppose?"

"He's gone to telephone," said Frank.

"Where did he go?" asked the manager.

"He went through that door over there," said Ace Johnson, pointing towards the door through which Mr. Mason had disappeared.

The manager frowned.

"But that would lead directly to my office," he said, "and I assure you he has not been to see me."

For a moment the importance of the words did not strike the two lads. But Ace Johnson eyed the manager with a sudden perturbation and he stood up quickly.

"I don't like the sound of that," he said. "I think we'd better go through and look round."

Suddenly realising the possibility that Mr. Mason had met with trouble, Frank and Alan hurried in the wake of the others. The door through which they entered not only led to the manager's office upstairs, but also to the small room in which the swarthy-faced gunman and the little driver who had figured in the road chase had been locked. They thought of this as they started upstairs, hoping against hope that they would find Frank's father in the manager's office.

But they were disappointed.

There was no sign of Richard Mason, and twenty minutes later when everyone attached to the aerodrome had been questioned, no news was forthcoming. It was then that Ace Johnson had an idea, which he quickly put into words.

"I wonder if by any chance he's talking to the prisoners?"

The manager suddenly beamed.

"Of course, mes enfants! That is where he will be! I have a key which will open the door—let us go!"

They all felt suddenly that they had been creating a lot of trouble out of nothing. They hurried along to the room which had been turned into a temporary prison, and tapped on the door. But no answer came, and Frank was looking very pale when at last the manager inserted his master-key in the lock and flung open the door.

Four men and two lads streamed into the prison—and all of them stood dead still a moment later.

For the room was empty. There was no sign at all of the two prisoners, and the small window in the room was gaping open!

CHAPTER X

A THREAT

FOR a few seconds none of the people standing in the otherwise empty room spoke. The surprise and disappointment was so acute that Frank Mason felt like crying, absurd though it was. It seemed impossible that such a thing could have happened.

Nonetheless the prisoners had succeeded in escaping, and they quickly realised it was useless for them to start crying over spilt milk.

It was Ace Johnson who made the first move.

"Here's a job for you, Captain Mannet," he said to the Captain of the gendarmes. "I think it's just as well for you to make enquiries immediately."

"But I can't see that there's anything I can do," protested the Captain. "I will of course make enquiries, but obviously the men have escaped through the window."

"And it is open, yes! And it is next to the road!" cried the airport manager.

"Which means that they could get away without any trouble," broke in Alan Blair, doing his best to hide his acute disappointment. At the moment even he had almost forgotten the

disappearance of Mr. Mason in the importance of this new discovery.

But Ace Johnson spoke suddenly.

"There's a connection between this and the disappearance of Mr. Mason," he said. "For one thing I don't think the men escaped through the window, Captain Mannet."

"You don't?" The Frenchman's voice rose.

"No," said Ace Johnson. "That window's pretty small, and I've got a lot of doubts as to whether the driver, let alone the tall man, could have got through."

As Ace spoke Frank Mason stepped across to the window and glanced at it. It was so small that he even doubted whether Alan Blair could get through, and what was more he saw a lot of dust on the ledge, which had not been disturbed. He told the others very quickly what he had found there, and the Captain of the gendarmerie looked at him attentively.

"That is good, mon enfant. What we would call the detective work, yes! Obviously these men got out through the door."

"But it was locked!" exclaimed the manager.

There was silence for a moment, which Ace Johnson broke in a very grim tone.

"That proves there is work for you, Captain," he said. "Because the door has a very difficult lock on it—I saw that when I came here before—and it suggests that someone managed to get a key."

The manager of the airport seemed to take this as a personal affront, and he started to protest in high-pitched, frantic French. Neither Alan nor Frank understood a word of what he was saying, but they gathered from his manner that he was angrily protesting. Frank Mason, however, was thinking hard, and suddenly he exclaimed loud enough to make the Frenchman break off in surprise.

Ace Johnson smiled at the youngster and the Captain said quickly:

"What is this, Monsieur Mason? Have you been detective again?"

"I have an idea that I know what happened," admitted Frank. "If someone came in here to try and release the two prisoners, and Dad happened to enter practically at the same time he would be taken by surprise, and quite likely knocked out. He had the key—and the man who attacked him would probably realise that, and find the key in his pocket. After that it would be easy."

The Captain clapped his hand resoundingly and Kit Warren chuckled.

"You're certainly feeling bright to-day," he admitted. "That sounds a most likely theory."

The words had no effect on Frank Mason whose only concern was to get news of his father. But he realised that it would be practically impossible for them to expect any immediate results. The Captain promised to put

everything possible into motion in an effort to trace Mr. Mason and the Turks who had attacked him, while Frank Mason and Alan Blair were left with the two airmen for consolation.

Frank was naturally dreadfully worried about this latest development. That his father had fallen into Sud Ben Ali's hands seemed proved beyond doubt, and he hated to think of what might happen. It was not open to doubt that the Turks were particularly anxious to kill Mr. Mason, and he was terribly afraid that his father had already been murdered.

It was Kit Warren who eased his mind.

"I don't think you need worry too much, old son," he said. "Had these fellows wanted to kill Mr. Mason immediately they would almost certainly have done so when they had taken the key, and he would have been found by now. I think you can take it as granted that they have some reason or other for not wanting to kill him. Perhaps they would find that he was likely to be much more useful as a prisoner."

That was an idea, and Alan Blair jumped at it gratefully. But Frank Mason was doubtful.

"It's not an hour since he was shot at by the man in the doorway," he pointed out.

"That's true enough," answered Ace Johnson very quickly, "but don't forget that we were all there then. These fellows might have some reason for wanting to get rid of all of us."

"Why on earth should they?" asked Frank.

The Flying Turk

"You've done nothing to anger Sud Ben Ali, have you?"

Neither Kit Warren nor Ace Johnson replied immediately and although it sounded absurd on the surface, Frank and Alan had a queer idea that the airmen knew more than they had so far admitted.

They did not ask any questions, however, and they were glad when Kit Warren suggested after about another ten minutes:

"I think we'd better get into the centre of the town and find a hotel. It's not much use hanging about here, and in a place like this practically anything can happen."

"I'm certainly tired of being here," admitted Frank, "but suppose Dad should come back?"

"We can leave a message with the manager and the officials here," said Ace Johnson, but he looked grim. "I don't want to seem a dismal Jonah, Frank, but I don't think there's much chance of your father getting away quickly. I'm afraid he's in Sud Ben Ali's hands——"

It was Alan who interrupted quickly.

"Isn't it possible that this man Sud Ben Ali is dead? Isn't it likely that there's someone else?"

"It's just possible," admitted Kit Warren, "but Ace and I have heard of this man Sud Ben Ali quite a lot. I can't imagine anyone else who's likely to go into an attack like this with quite the same ruthlessness. I think we can put

A Threat

III

our money on learning sooner or later that Sud Ben Ali is still alive and kicking. Anyhow, try not to worry too much about it but let's get away to the hotel, and you two lads will be our guests until your father turns up."

"Supposing"—Frank Mason spoke and although he tried hard he could not prevent his voice from shaking a little—"supposing he *doesn't* turn up?"

"I don't think you need worry about that," said Ace with that flashing smile which inspired both lads with a sudden confidence. "As I said before if they had been going to kill him it would have happened by now. So be more cheerful and let's get going."

The famous airman left messages with the manager and the Captain, and then led the way out of the air-field. Just outside was a rank of cabs—or in French, *fiacres*—and a wheezy, very fat driver was at the wheel of the leading cab. The others tumbled in and after a ten-minute drive through the crowded streets of Marseilles, he pulled up outside a hotel which the two fliers knew well from past experience.

In any other circumstances Frank Mason and Alan Blair would have been fascinated by the changing scene, by the people in the streets, by the tremendous din which the traffic kicked up, and the apparently suicidal risks which their own driver took, but both of them were far too worried by the disappearance of Mr.

Mason, however, to pay much attention to anything.

The next half-hour passed very quickly. Both Ace and Kit did their best to make the youngsters more cheerful, but there was very little they could do, and although Kit Warren—who could tell a funny story extremely well—did his best to keep them laughing he was not entirely successful.

The hotel was a fairly large one and Ace Johnson had booked two rooms for the night. They were sitting in a room over-looking the street, and on a small table by the door stood a telephone. All four of them jerked up suddenly when the telephone burred out. As always it was Ace Johnson who got up first and walked towards it. The other three were eyeing him tensely, for none of them could conceive who might be ringing them.

Frank Mason told himself that it was just possible there was some news from the aerodrome, and he could hardly control his anxiety. But as he saw the expression on Ace Johnson's face, saw the airman's smile disappear and a dark frown replace it he realised that the news was bad and not good.

Alan Blair saw the airman's expression, and also understood that this meant trouble. Kit Warren was sitting back in his chair without any expression on his face, but the youngsters believed that he too was worried.

Once or twice Ace Johnson snapped something into the telephone, but it was impossible for them to guess what the conversation was about from his brusque words. One thing was certain. He was having no truck with the man on the wire, and his manner was arbitrary to a degree.

"I don't think you will," he said finally and banged down the receiver.

A moment later he turned round and his face was set in even grimmer lines than before. For a second he did not speak but stepped across the room and rested his hand on Frank Mason's shoulder.

"I wouldn't call it exactly good news," he said with the half-smile which Frank was beginning to expect from him, "but on the other hand I'm not sure it's too bad. At all events your father is alive."

Frank's heart leapt at the news. He had been dreadfully afraid that he would shortly learn that Sud Ben Ali or his men had murdered his father.

"Then—then where is he?" the youngster asked.

Ace Johnson did not immediately reply. He seemed to be weighing up the pros and cons of the situation, although he must have realised that Kit Warren, Alan Blair and Frank Mason were all on tenterhooks to know just what had taken place during that telephone conversation.

The Flying Turk

But Ace Johnson realised that he must be very careful what he said. He certainly would not allow himself to suggest anything which might cause Frank Mason to fear that there was no hope of ever finding his father alive again. On the other hand he knew that he had to deal with a shrewd youngster whose mind was developed far above his years, and it would be useless for him to prevaricate too much.

He drew a deep breath at last.

"At the moment," he said slowly, "your father is on the way to India. He——"

But he did not continue for Frank Mason broke in quickly, his eyes widening.

"You mean he's been kidnapped and taken abroad?"

"I'm afraid so," said Ace Johnson. "On the other hand I'm prepared to believe the man who called me when he said that your father is safe and well. It rather looks to me, young 'un, as though these fellows have discovered that your father has some information which they particularly want, and they are prepared to go to any lengths to force it from him."

Frank Mason did not immediately realise the full meaning of the words. The only thing which seemed to fasten itself in his mind was the fact that his father was a prisoner in the hands of Sud Ben Ali and winging his way across the skies towards India. He had been hoping against hope that when news did come he would learn

that the older man was somewhere in the neighbourhood of Marseilles; and that there would be a reasonable chance of a rescue. Now he could not see any possibility of rescuing his father, certainly not until he reached India. On top of that there was the added feeling of helplessness caused by the fear that none of them had any idea to what part of India Sud Ben Ali had taken his father.

Then he began to realise the fuller meaning of Ace Johnson's words.

If it was true that his father had certain information which the Turks considered to be essential for them to have, it suggested in no uncertain manner that his father would be forced to suffer all kinds of privation and hardship, and even torture, in order to force him to talk.

From what the youngster knew of the older man he did not think there was much chance of Mr. Mason talking unless he was suffering under the direst pressure. The youngster was filled with horror at the prospect, and for a few moments he could only stand and stare at Ace Johnson, trying to realise just what this meant, and, trying also to see some way in which a rescue could be effected.

When at last he did speak his voice was very low and level, and his hands were clenched at his side.

"Then there's only one thing for it," he said.

"That's what?" asked Ace Johnson, more

116 The Flying Turk

appreciative of this youngster's qualities than ever he had been before.

"We've got to try and get on their trail," said Frank. "Somehow or other we've got to fly after them to India!"

Alan Blair realised something of what his friend must be feeling, but as the words came out he felt flummoxed. He could not see any way at all in which he and Frank—it was typical of Alan that he did not dream of letting Frank start alone—could possibly charter an aeroplane, or risk their lives in the wilds of India. On the other hand Frank's words sent a thrill of excitement through him, and somehow even before Ace Johnson or Kit Warren spoke, the youngster felt convinced that they would offer all the help they could.

If they did it meant that they would after all fly to India, but in very different circumstances from those which they had expected when they had left London. Circumstances, in fact, which could only mean that all the time they were in the air or on the ground they would be living in danger of their lives.

CHAPTER XI

IN PURSUIT

FOR a few seconds after Frank Mason had spoken so grimly neither Ace Johnson nor Kit Warren spoke. Both of them realised two things. From the moment they had reached Marseilles and heard from Richard Mason something of the trouble which lay behind the attack from the air, they had determined that if there was anything they could do to help the other man they would do it. In more ways than one it was fortunate for the lads that these two famous fliers had come to Marseilles off their own bat, and that they were answerable to no one for their actions. Had they been officially attached to the Royal Air Force then it would have been impossible for them to do anything without first obtaining permission. But they were private citizens, they knew practically all there was to know about flying, and their many exploits proved beyond doubt that they had all the courage necessary to enter combat with Sud Ben Ali or the men who were fighting in the Turk's cause.

If the fliers were already determined that what they could do to rescue Mr. Mason should be done, there was another thing which neither Frank Mason nor Alan Blair really appreciated.

Ace Johnson—who usually gave the orders which Kit Warren carried out—knew that directly Mr. Mason had realised that there was danger, he had determined to take his son and Alan Blair back to England. In other words he had not been terribly worried about his own fate, but he had been deeply anxious that no harm should befall the youngsters.

What then should Ace Johnson do?

The obvious thing was for him to make sure that Frank and Alan were taken back to England and put in safe hands. If that course was adopted Ace Johnson was quite prepared to go to the lengths of approaching the police, telling them the whole story, and making sure that until it was certain they were safe, they were never without a guard.

This was undoubtedly the wisest and the correct thing to do. It was absurd on the face of it of even to contemplate the possibility of allowing the lads to fly in the wake of the kidnappers. On the other hand as Ace Johnson looked into Frank Mason's steady eyes, he told himself that he was facing someone who was more than a schoolboy, someone who would be prepared, even if the odds be all against him, to fight to the bitter end to save his father.

He had a good idea, also, that Alan Blair was made of the same stern stuff. Was it right, then, that they should be sent back to England to wait in suspense until they had news of Mr.

Mason, or would it really be wiser to let them come on the journey?

Ace Johnson summed up all these things very quickly; then he smiled a little and in order to break the tension which had arisen he poked Frank playfully in the ribs.

"That's all very well, old son," he said. "But how do you know your father would want you to go after him?"

Frank forced a smile which he did not feel.

"I know he would come after me in the same circumstances," he said. "Anyhow, from what I can see I shall be in just as much danger in England or France as I shall be in India, so if it's humanly possible I'm going."

Ace Johnson determined to put the youngster to an even sterner test.

"It's easy to say that," he said, "but you and Alan would be in a pretty hopeless mess if you started off to India alone. You've never piloted a 'plane, have you?"

"I haven't," admitted Frank, "but I could easily hire a pilot." He did not say so but he was feeling tremendously disappointed at the attitude which the famous airman seemed to be taking up.

Ace Johnson nodded seriously.

"You could do that," he admitted, "but it's going to be pretty expensive. For one thing you'll want at least two men with you, and you'll have to make sure you get someone who's not scared at the possibility of a bullet.

They'll have to be armed, and the aeroplane will have to be one of the best available. I doubt whether you could do it on less than a thousand pounds."

Ace was putting the situation as awkwardly as possible, for he wanted to see just what Frank's reaction would be when he came face to face with difficulties. He did not have long to wait.


For the first time since the telephone call Frank Mason smiled with something approaching real humour.

"I daresay I shall be able to get someone without much trouble. If necessary I would telephone to every famous flier whose name has ever appeared in the newspapers and explain what I wanted until I found someone who was agreeable."

"That's one way out," admitted Ace Johnson speaking for all the world as though it had not occurred to him to make the flight. "But what about the money?"

Frank smiled again.

"Thanks to my father," he said, "there isn't going to be any difficulty about that. Although I've never told anyone I have three thousand pounds in the bank. Of course the bank manager—who's a friend of father's—has instructions not to let me take out any big amounts unless there's some real emergency. I don't doubt, however, that he will consider the rescue of my father a sufficient cause."



Frank was speaking rather quickly, for he could not prevent himself from feeling that Ace Johnson was opposed to the suggestion. It even flashed through his mind that the famous airman might know more than he professed about the disappearance, but for a moment he remembered that flying leap from one car to the other, which proved beyond any doubt the sincerity of Ace Johnson's attitude against Sud Ben Ali.

All this time Alan Blair and Kit Warren had been watching the other two and waiting expectantly. It was natural that Alan should feel very much the same as Frank was doing, and he was more than a little disappointed that Ace Johnson had not immediately suggested that he should take control of the rescue flight. Kit Warren, on the other hand, had more than an idea of what his friend was doing and he could not prevent himself from smiling from time to time.

Then suddenly Ace Johnson chuckled, and that devil-may-care expression crossed his face again. But Frank Mason did not properly understand why, and he could not help but feel that the airman was jeering at him by laughing.

"I don't know——" he started, but Ace Johnson gripped his arm suddenly, and stopped laughing.

"Jerk out of it, Frank! I couldn't help but be amused to find that you'd got an answer for everything. I know that I'm speaking for Kit

as well as myself when I say we're prepared to start off any time after your father and Sud Ben Ali. The trouble is—ought you to come with us?"

For a moment Frank Mason could not speak. He realised suddenly just how unjust he had been to the other man, and he felt full of self-reproach. On the other hand, the suggestion that he and Alan should not be allowed to take part in the flight was more important than anything else.

"If you leave us behind," he said quickly, "I'll still hire another aeroplane to follow you!"

"That's the spirit!" exclaimed Ace Johnson.

Kit Warren spoke next, his eyes twinkling more merrily even than usual.

"I've got an idea, Ace, that they'll be just as safe with us as they will be on their own."

"Of course we will," broke in Alan Blair, so excited at the prospect that he could hardly keep his voice steady. "We'll probably be more useful than anyone else."

"That wouldn't surprise me a bit," admitted Ace Johnson, and he was suddenly serious and business-like. He was still not sure whether it was wise but he had determined that the youngsters could go with them on the commencement of the flight at least.

"So we can come?" burst out Frank.

"The trouble seems to me to be keeping you away," said Ace Johnson with a quick smile. "But now we've reached that decision we've

got to get busy. The devil of it is we don't know the description of the aeroplane in which your father is flying, but I daresay we'll manage to get it without too much trouble. Will you two youngsters stay here while Kit and I see what we can do about getting some provisions and kit together?"

"Of course," said Frank quickly. "But how are you going to get on the trail of the machine?"

"With any luck," said Ace Johnson quickly, "we shall be able to find out from the air patrols in different countries whether a strange machine has been sighted. Practically every machine flying over a civilized country is recorded and reported you know."

The others did not know that, and the news gave them hope which they had not felt before. While Ace Johnson and Kit Warren left the hotel bedroom and went out to make hurried arrangements, they sat and talked over the situation.

In many ways they hated the temporary inaction which was forced on them, but they realised that everything possible was being done to hasten the rescue flight.

"I wonder how far the others have gone?" asked Alan Blair.

"I shouldn't imagine they could have been in the air more than a couple of hours," said Frank. "So that means about four hundred miles."

"So they should be flying just beyond Sardinia," said Alan. "They'll be sighted over Sicily for certain, or else over the boot of Italy."

"It's a wonderful system if they can trace a strange aeroplane without a description of it," said Frank Mason.

It was not until later that he realised the real effectiveness of the look-out system of the air. Every country had its own look-out men, both in the clouds and on the ground, who saw and reported the number of every aeroplane which flew across his territory. In that way it was possible for the governments of foreign countries to know whether foreign—and possibly enemy—aeroplanes were flying over without permission. Permission, in fact, had to be obtained before any aeroplane could fly over a country, and any machine which was flying without it risked trouble.

Frank and Alan realised the possibility that the 'plane in which their father was being taken away would be flying at a tremendous height in order to avoid being seen. They could only wait and hope for the best and every moment seemed to drag like an hour.

It was half an hour later that Kit Warren returned to the hotel, by himself.

"Any luck?" cried Frank Mason as soon as the door opened and the flier appeared.

Kit drew his hand through his curly, brown hair.

"Quite a bit," he said. "A cabin biplane with a Turkish number was seen flying over Corsica half an hour ago, and we ought to be able to get in touch with it, or have news of it, by radio."

"That's grand," said Frank Mason. "But didn't that man tell Ace that they were going to India?"

"He did," admitted Kit Warren, "but remember Sud Ben Ali is a Turk, and that man we took prisoner was also a Turk. There's some connection between Turkey and India in this business, and with any luck we're going to find out just what it is. Still, we've not much time for worrying just at the moment. You fellows have got your luggage packed, have you?"

"Shall we need everything we brought with us from England?" asked Alan Blair.

"I don't suppose Frank's father packed too much for you," Kit said with a smile. "We'll get the porters to take it downstairs. I've a taxi there, and Ace is waiting for us at the air-field."

"Do you mean we're ready to start?" asked Frank Mason.

"We certainly are," said Kit Warren with a cheerful smile. "We can't take any chances or waste any time. I managed to get hold of that information while Ace was at the aerodrome, making sure that the two 'planes are fuelled, and quite ready for a long flight. All provisions and drink will be there by the time we arrive."

It took Frank Mason and Alan Blair just five minutes to get out of the hotel bedroom and into the taxi which was waiting outside. It was dark now, and the lights of Marseilles seemed much more confusing than those of any big English towns. The traffic, moreover, seemed higgledy-piggledy, and the driver of the taxi drove with a recklessness which would have been considered criminal in England.

But they were not likely to make any protest against anything which would mean a greater speed, and at least they did not have to complain about the drive to the airport being slow.

They reached it in fifteen minutes, and when the taxi pulled up outside the offices of the aerodrome Alan and Frank saw that Ace Johnson was waiting there with the Captain of the gendarmes, and the aerodrome manager.

As the lads stepped out of the cab, the manager approached them, his hands outstretched. Frank wondered what on earth was coming, but Kit Warren was smiling.

"Bravo, *mes enfants!*" cried the manager. "Mr. Johnson has told me just what you are going to do. It is courage of the highest, and I salute you!"

Without a moment's hesitation he seized Frank's shoulders and kissed him heartily on both cheeks. Before Alan could avoid it the salute was repeated, and both lads coloured furiously. Somehow that incident, remarkable

in itself, helped them to forget the grimness of the flight which they were about to undertake. Certainly they hurried over to the two machines which had carried Ace Johnson and Kit Warren from England, more concerned at avoiding a repetition of that kissing affair than anything else.

"Well," said Ace Johnson as they reached the first machine. "Who's coming on the *Swallow* and who's coming on the *Hawk*?"

Not until that moment did the two youngsters see that Ace Johnson's machine was called the *Hawk*—the name was painted on the sides in large lettering—and Kit Warren's machine was the *Swallow*.

It was Alan who suggested quickly.

"Supposing we toss up for it?"

"That's an idea," said Kit Warren, more pleased than he could say that the two youngsters did not appear to be taking this affair too seriously. They were serious enough, of course, but they were quite prepared to see the funny side of anything which developed.

"Heads you go in the *Hawk*," said Frank quickly, "and tails you go in the *Swallow*."

"That's all right with me," said Alan.

And thus it was that while the mechanics fussed about the two machines putting the finishing touches to the preparations for the long distance flight, the two English lads tossed a coin into the air and waited for it to decide which of them could travel with Ace and which with Kit.

The Flying Turk

The coin dropped and rolled along the grass for a few seconds. When it came to rest tails was uppermost and Kit Warren said with a chuckle:

"You come with me then, Alan."

"And I'll take this young rogue," said Ace Johnson.

Very quickly, without making any fuss, the two lads embarked. Both Kit and Ace shook hands before they climbed into their respective cabins, and Alan repeated it with Frank.

They did not realise that the two friends were aware of the possibility that before they landed again one or the other would crash. That handshake was never forgotten, for the dangers of the air were ever present.

And as the two powerful monoplanes, both of them capable of a speed of nearly three hundred miles an hour and products of the most recent inventions of aeronautical engineers, started to run along the ground with their powerful twin engines roaring, the more experienced fliers realised that on this flight the dangers were likely to be increased a hundred-fold. There was not only the possibility of meeting with trouble in the air through heavy weather or engine failure, but there was the prospect of still another attack from the men who had set themselves so viciously against Richard Mason.

Only time could tell what would happen.

CHAPTER XII

AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT

It was the first time that either of the youngsters had been in an aeroplane at night, and somehow there was a mystery about flying through the darkness which surrounded them. So great was its effect on them that they hardly realised the true reason for their flight. There was something wonderful about the gradual climb from the ground towards the skies in which the stars were shining brightly against dark heavens, and in the distance a crescent moon was shedding a silvery light over the sea.

Once again Frank Mason was amazed at the smoothness of the aeroplane when it was in the air. He had hardly realised that he was separated from Alan Blair for the first time since they had left England, but he was not sorry to see the navigation lights of the *Swallow* some hundred yards behind them.

Ace Johnson was too busy for a few minutes to do much talking, and Frank was able to look round the cabin in which he found himself.

It was naturally very different from the big sub-divided cabin of the *Cloud*, but he saw

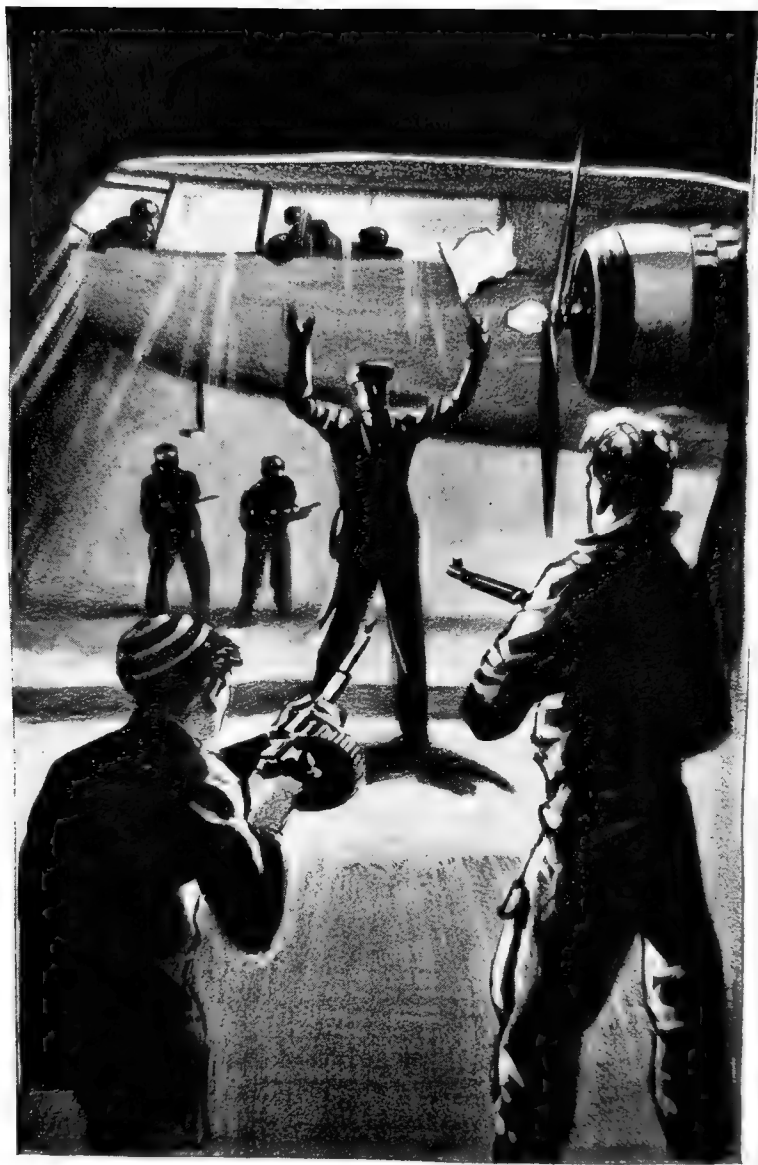
that everything was made as comfortable as possible, and that there was room for two pilots and three passengers in the fairly spacious cabin. The cushions and backs of the seats were filled with sponge rubber to give the greatest possible comfort during long-distance flights, and the sides of the cabin were covered with small boxes, all of which he observed contained some of the provisions and supplies for the flight. One box larger than any of the others was marked First Aid, others were marked with what they contained—food, drink, and various things—while two large boxes which were fitted to the floor as well as the wall, had nothing on them at all.

A little later Frank was to know what they contained, but at the moment he repressed his curiosity and asked no questions.

He walked across to the windows, and saw that in all of them there was a slot perhaps an inch and a half high and five inches wide. This was covered with a small piece of sliding metal and he wondered just what the purpose of them was.

As it happened Ace Johnson had taken the *Hawk* up to a height of five thousand feet—which was as far as he intended to go until they reached land—and at that moment he glanced round, seeing Frank's finger in one of the slots.

"Hallo, young man, getting curious?"



A MOMENT LATER THEY SAW A MAN WALK IN FRONT OF THE MACHINE WAVING A FLAG, AND EVEN IN THOSE QUEER CIRCUMSTANCES IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT IT WAS A WHITE FLAG

An Unexpected Development 131

"I was wondering what it was," admitted Frank.

"It's used," said Ace Johnson, "for the unpleasant business of shooting through, old son. These 'planes of ours—the *Swallow* is exactly the same as this—were originally made for fighting, and we have adapted them to civil flying conditions."

Frank's eyes glistened.

"You mean that when you pull back one of these slots you can fire out of them?"

"That's just what I do mean," admitted Ace Johnson, "and what's more you can do it without letting too much air into the cabin."

"If the other fellows are fighting back," said Frank, "the glass would soon be smashed, wouldn't it?"

"It would need a bomb or a howitzer shell to smash this glass," said Ace. "It's half an inch thick, and it's practically unbreakable. I don't say it would make a bullet bounce off, but the worst that could happen would be a small hole, drilled where the bullet entered."

Frank Mason was amazed to learn the strength of the glass, although he realised that he should have known that if motor-cars were fitted with safety glass an aeroplane certainly would be. What was perhaps more surprising was the fact that this aeroplane, and the *Swallow*, was fitted up as a fighter. He did not put it into words but he felt relieved at the discovery

that it was a fighter, and one which could almost certainly withstand any normal attack. He knew, of course, that nothing in the world could withstand bombing, such as that from which the *Cloud* had nearly suffered. On the other hand combating an enemy 'plane in this light and easily manœuvrable monoplane would be much easier than Captain Dennis had found it in the air-liner.

For perhaps half an hour they went on, without speaking.

Frank wondered what Alan Blair was thinking in the *Swallow* and he told himself that his friend was almost certainly having the time of his life. For his part he could not resist a feeling that he was enjoying the flight in the monoplane even more than he would have done in the *Cloud*. There was something about the *Hawk* different from the air-liner, which in a way had seemed liked a tremendous flying hotel.

He had liked the pilot of the *Cloud* well enough, and even now he could remember the competent way in which Captain Dennis had handled the emergency situation which had arisen. On the other hand there was something about Ace Johnson's easy smile, and his past record, which made the youngster feel that he was now with a man who would take many more chances than Captain Dennis could ever have done.

An Unexpected Development 133

All the time, of course, there remained the almost frightening reason for this second stage of their flight.

His father was in the hands of the enemy—for that was the only way in which he could look at Sud Ben Ali and his colleagues—and the chances of rescue must of necessity be small.

Frank Mason was so worried that he tried his best not to think a great deal of the task in front of them. It was madness to think and to worry. On the other hand this travelling in the *Hawk* with the monoplane winging its way across the skies at a tremendous speed seemed conducive to thinking. How was it possible to forget the urgent motive of their flight?

Ace Johnson had been busy with his own thoughts but suddenly he realised something of what must be passing through the youngster's mind. Consequently he decided to open the conversation, and he looked round at Frank with a smile.

All the time they had been humming towards the distant heavens, the cloudless sky was twinkling with the stars which seemed brighter here than Frank had ever seen them in England. The roaring of the twin engines came dully to their ears, and Frank could see from the instruments that they had been flying practically all the time at five thousand feet, and at the stupendous speed of two hundred and forty miles an hour.

"I've got an idea," said Ace Johnson, "that we're catching up on them, old son."

"What makes you think that?" asked Frank quickly.

"The good and simple reason that the biplane that was sighted was travelling at about a hundred and eighty."

"So we're travelling nearly half as fast again?" said Frank.

"You seemed to have worked that out for yourself," said Ace Johnson. "Yes—and by the time we reach Turkey we should certainly be on their tails. But we should have some news about them soon."

"How on earth can you get it?" asked Frank.

For answer Ace Johnson pointed to the radio set which was built in the side of the cabin near the pilot. Almost as if it knew that it was being discussed the radio began to crackle!

"Well, I'm blest!" cried Frank. "I——"

And then he stopped.

For Ace Johnson had quickly tuned in so that he could take the message, and a high-pitched voice which spoke in English and yet had a definite trace of a foreign accent came clearly.

"Biplane FZU81K18 sighted over Trapani, flying at ten thousand feet en route for Catania. Message for British monoplanes Hawk and Swallow." "Biplane FZU81K18 sighted over

An Unexpected Development 135

Trapani, flying at ten thousand feet en route for Catania. Message for British monoplanes Hawk and Swallow. "Biplane FZU8IK18 . . . "

For a moment Frank Mason could not speak. The message broke off abruptly after it had been repeated three times, and Ace Johnson's eyes were gleaming.

"That's good going," he said. "Trapani is on the east coast of Sicily, and we shall be over Sardinia soon. In other words they are only about two hundred miles in front."

Frank's eyes flashed.

"That means we've gained nearly a hundred miles."

"As far as we can tell, yes," admitted Ace Johnson. "But remember we aren't sure where the other fellows have been meantime. Still, it's promising."

It certainly was promising, and Frank Mason felt much easier in his mind than he had for some time past. He was helped by the knowledge that Ace Johnson had somehow contrived to get the messages flashed over the ether to the *Hawk*. He felt that they were not fighting a lone battle, that these pieces of information were of vital importance and would probably help them tremendously in the next few hours. He knew, of course, that they had only the enemies' word that the biplane was flying to

136 The Flying Turk

India, and for his part he was inclined to think that it was quite possible that the actual journey's end, for his father, was Turkey.

But there was no sense in raising possibilities like that, and he made no comment, except to ask:

"Will Alan and Kit know this?"

"They will have picked up the message all right," said Ace Johnson, and he smiled to himself.

Frank Mason hardly realised that both he and Alan Blair had fallen into the habit of addressing the fliers by their nicknames, instead of with the more formal 'Mr.' Both Ace Johnson and Kit Warren much preferred it, but the famous flier could not but help smiling at the ease at which Kits' name came from Frank's lips. He was glad that the message had come for it would help to take Frank's mind off the dangers of the situation, and the peril that surrounded his father. He knew that provided Frank Mason could feel there was a reasonable chance of action, he would be more settled in his mind.

Neither he nor Frank had any idea of how near that action was!

For less than two miles ahead of them a wasp-like monoplane was hovering, flying at a height of ten thousand feet. Its pilot, whom Frank Mason and Alan Blair would have recognised as the little driver of the car in

An Unexpected Development 137

Marseilles, was peering through his night-glasses towards the navigation lights of the *Hawk*.

Suddenly he grunted, and the tall swarthy-faced man who had been a prisoner for a short time at the aerodrome, said:

"Are we ready?"

"We can drop down on them now," snapped the pilot.

Thus it was that as the *Hawk* and the *Swallow* honed across the skies, the other 'plane was diving towards them with two members of its crew sitting by the slotted windows, their fingers on the triggers of two wicked-looking machine-guns.

Battle and death were lurking in the skies!

CHAPTER XIII

THE BATTLE IN THE AIR

THE brief conversation which had followed the receipt of the radio message had served to loosen Frank Mason's tongue. Quite unthinkingly he asked several questions, and then he said with a smile:

"Don't you find it difficult flying at night?"

"We fly almost entirely by our instruments," said Ace Johnson, "and in good weather they're practically infallible. But we're not altogether helpless even without the instruments."

"Why is that?" asked Frank.

For answer Ace Johnson touched a pair of glasses which were resting near him, and Frank accepted the invitation to pick them up. To his surprise when he looked through the glasses towards the sea, he could see the shimmering surface whereas with the naked eye only darkness had appeared. He began to look about him, speaking as he did so.

"I suppose these are what you call night-glasses?"

"They're the fellows," said Ace Johnson, "and if they fail us we can still use these things."

As he spoke he touched a switch on the control-board and immediately ahead of the *Hawk*

The Battle in the Air 139

there shot a tremendous white beam of light. It was dazzling, brilliant, and it seemed to stretch for miles ahead of them.

Frank Mason had often been amazed at the power behind a car headlight, but he realised that the searchlights on an aeroplane were considerably more powerful. For curiosity's sake he glanced above the beam of light, and searched the skies.

For a moment he could hardly believe his eyes, for there was something above them, something dark against the star-lit sky. Yet it seemed to be moving towards them. For a moment he stopped smiling, concentrating on the thing which he believed he could see. Ace Johnson saw his puzzled expression and said quickly:

"What's the matter, young 'un?"

"That almost looks like another aeroplane," said Frank Mason.

Ace Johnson lost little or no time. He noted the direction in which Frank was looking and immediately he pulled back on the joy-stick. The nose of the *Hawk* pointed upwards and the broad beam of the searchlight carved its way through the darkness.

And suddenly it shone upon a silvery streak which flashed ahead of them, perhaps two hundred feet higher than they were flying.

"Great Scot!" The exclamation forced itself from the pilot's lips. "There's someone up

there flying without navigation lights, and I don't like the look of it. Frank—that long box fitted to the floor. Open it, will you?"

As Frank Mason swung round to obey, amazed at Ace Johnson's reaction and yet cool enough even then, he heard Ace talking as though to himself.

"There's someone ahead—I'm going to drop. Suggest you climb."

And then suddenly through the stillness of the cabin came the words:

"All right, Ace. I'll climb."

Frank was amazed to hear the familiar tones of Kit Warren, and as he reached the box he realised that Ace had been talking by radio to the other 'plane. But he had very little time for thinking, and he had the lid of the box off in a flash. What he saw amazed him.

At the bottom of the box were two small snub-nosed machine-guns—he recognised them in a flash. It was the last thing he had expected, but now he realised that Ace Johnson and Kit Warren had certainly been prepared for trouble when they started out on the flight.

He hardly needed telling what to do, but took the first gun out and rested it on a seat. Hardly had he done so when he heard the pilot's sudden exclamation, and a moment later he heard something rattling against the body of the monoplane.

He glanced out of the window, towards the light, and as he did so he saw the little red

The Battle in the Air 141

speckles of flame which seemed to be coming out of the blue. Not until then did he realise what was happening, but suddenly his lips tightened and his eyes narrowed.

That silver shape *was* another aeroplane and it had been firing at them. The things rattling on the body of the *Hawk* were machine-gun bullets!

It did not occur to Frank Mason to put the thing in his own mind in dramatic terms, but he would have been fully justified in calling it his baptism of fire. Truth to tell he was suddenly, fiercely aware of the need for fighting back, and for beating the attacking 'plane off. That the attack should have been made by dead of night, that the death-dealing monoplane should have swooped out of the air on them, that the issue at stake was so great as to cause such desperate fighting, none of these facts passed through his mind at all. Nor did he consciously realise that any moment the bullets might strike an important part of the *Hawk*, and the great monoplane might go crashing down into the sea in flames.

Action was needed—and he thought of nothing else.

Ace Johnson had pushed the nose of the monoplane down sharply, and it swooped out of the line of fire, although Frank could still see those little red blotches of flame above him.

The Flying Turk

But the manœuvre had been so sudden and unexpected, that the enemy were, temporarily at least, beaten off.

Ace was smiling, his eyes keen and his voice as steady as ever.

"Good work, young 'un. Always keep cool and you'll never be far wrong. Hand me one of those guns."

As he finished speaking the famous airman locked the controls, and sent the *Hawk* along in the straight line for several seconds. While the machine was flying thus, he put the machine gun into working order, and made sure that the drum which contained the bullets was fully loaded. He did this so quickly that Frank Mason had no time to see just what he was doing. Then the youngster handed his friend the other gun, and Ace repeated the manœuvre.

As soon as he had done so he took the machine out of its locked controls and tickled the rudder-bar, sending the *Hawk* round in a screeching bend.

"That'll make sure they have a warm welcome when they start again," Ace said, and still he spoke just as coolly as if this was just an ordinary everyday affair.

"I wonder how the others got on," he added casually.

Frank Mason's eyes widened in sudden alarm. It was almost incredible, but in the excitement of that fierce brush with the enemy 'plane he

The Battle in the Air 143

had completely forgotten Alan Blair and Kit Warren! Ace Johnson guessed something of what was passing through the youngster's mind, and he said with a chuckle:

"I shouldn't worry about Kit—he can handle that tin can of his as well as you can handle a bicycle. I——"

Ace broke off as the wireless began to make spluttering noises again, and Frank—who had quickly seen how to tune in—worked the knob round until he had the correct wave length. Suddenly he heard Alan Blair's voice entering the cabin!

The marvel of wireless, the remarkable fact that although they were flying along at hundreds of miles an hour they could trap the sound waves and condense them so that the words were heard as clearly as if Alan had been in the same cabin, did not occur to Frank at the moment. All that worried him was the gist of Alan's words.

"Are you all right, *Hawk*? We're two thousand feet above the enemy."

"We're fine," said Frank, and he could not understand why Ace burst out laughing. But Ace Johnson pointed out to him a little later that the youngster had forgotten that the transmitter of the *Hawk* had not been adjusted! The outburst had been quite spontaneous and Frank had not realised how foolish he had been.

It was the work only of a few seconds to get

the transmitting apparatus working properly and then Frank sent his message.

Alan Blair's voice came again.

"Kit Warren says well done," he said. "He's now over the enemy, and stopping him from escaping."

Ace Johnson leant forward to the transmitting mouthpiece quickly.

"Tell him to keep like it," he said. "We'll be back in a few seconds."

This strange conversation ceased a moment later, and Ace Johnson and Frank Mason began to prepare for the fight. It did not occur to either of them that there was much possibility of them being brought down. Although it was dark the single advantage which the other 'plane had had, that of making a surprise attack, was now lost: the odds were two to one against the Turks.

Ace Johnson realised, however, that so far they were flying completely blind and they had no real idea of the strength of the enemy 'plane. More than that, he was prepared to discover that there was more than one machine prepared to go into action against them. Ace had only the vaguest idea of the motive for these terrible attempts to crash them, but he could very easily understand the immense power of Sud Ben Ali or those men who were working for the same cause. He was now convinced that there was only one possible way

The Battle in the Air 145

of rescuing Mr. Mason. That was to find out where he was hidden, and make a lightning raid.

But the first task was to get rid of the present attackers.

Frank Mason sat in a seat, with the muzzle of a machine-gun poking through the left-hand slot of the cabin window. The *Hawk* had turned completely round now, and was flying towards the spot where the attacking 'plane had been seen a few minutes before. His searchlight flashed on suddenly, carving its brilliant white light through the black heavens, and the *Hawk* went forward like a rocket, travelling at two hundred and forty miles an hour.

Frank was on tip-toe with excitement. The dangers which surrounded them were forgotten. But what concerned him was that the enemy 'plane was this time on the defence instead of on the attack.

Suddenly the darkness ahead of them was split by the dazzling beams of the searchlights from the other two 'planes.

It made a wonderful sight, the three brilliant beams moving rapidly to and fro, twisting and turning as the pilots manœuvred their 'planes. For a few seconds Frank hardly realised what this was, but then suddenly he burst out:

"The others are fighting!"

"They're at it hammer and tongs," admitted Ace Johnson.

Frank stared in fascination at the battle which was being fought, perhaps half a mile away from them and at a height of at least ten thousand feet above the sea. The searchlights curved in and out, from the cabins of the 'planes came those stabs of red and yellow flames and Frank could almost imagine that he could hear the *tap-tap-tap* of the machine-guns. He had no idea which 'plane was which, but suddenly the *Hawk*, climbing fast, flew above the combatants and Ace switched the searchlights downwards.

Staring out of the window Frank Mason saw the unmistakable lines of the *Swallow*, a little on their right. The enemy 'plane was larger, but more clumsy, and it was on the run!

Frank was almost sorry that the battle was being waged between the other two 'planes, and that for the time being at least all he could do was to stand by and watch. But the fascination of the thing possessed him. He saw the larger machine tearing through the heavens, and he believed it was climbing a little. On its tail was the *Swallow* flying perilously close, with those flashes of red and yellow flames stabbing through the darkness time after time.

The Turkish 'plane was fighting a rear-guard battle, but obviously it was in full flight.

"I told you Kit would give them beans," said Ace Johnson with a chuckle. "We'll keep above them just in case of accidents."

The Battle in the Air 147

Swinging the *Hawk* round in one of those terrifying, screeching bends which sent Frank lurching to the side of the cabin, Ace followed up his words.

The *Hawk* was now flying in the same direction as the other two machines, perhaps two hundred feet above them.

Ace Johnson broke the tense silence which had lasted for several seconds.

"I've got an idea they're losing height fast," he said. "It looks to me as though they're trying to get down."

"Why?" gasped Frank Mason.

"I'm by no means sure that we're flying over the sea now," admitted Ace Johnson. "I've an idea that we're just about over Corsica. But the devils are going down!"

Even Frank Mason could see now that the two 'planes were considerably further beneath them than they had been a moment before. Ace did not hesitate but pushed the joy-stick forward a little, and all three machines dropped towards the earth, with the two fighting machines blazing away for all they were worth.

For the life of him Frank Mason could not understand why Ace did not go down and put the finishing touch to the fight. He was quite sure that if the *Hawk* joined the *Swallow* in the battle, then the enemy 'plane would be finished.

Almost as though he could read the youngster's mind Ace Johnson said:

"If they are going to land, we might collar them, and have more luck than we had with the other prisoners."

Frank's eyes gleamed.

"I didn't think of that," he said excitedly.

"We might be able to learn where Dad has been taken."

"That's just what I'm hoping," said Ace Johnson.

For a few seconds both of them were silent, but the *Hawk* roared downwards until the altimeter-recorder revealed the fact that they were flying at less than two thousand feet. The other two 'planes were at least five hundred feet beneath them and still losing height. Their searchlights were still playing, and Frank was inclined to think that the *Swallow* was further behind the enemy 'plane than it had been a few minutes before. Perhaps Kit Warren was working on the same idea as Ace Johnson.

Frank Mason was seething with excitement. If they did force the other 'plane to land, if they did manage to take them prisoners, they would almost certainly be able to get information out of the enemy, information that would be vital to their chances of rescuing his father.

The question was—would they get down safely and succeed in taking prisoners?

CHAPTER XIV

NEWS!

ALAN BLAIR had had the most exciting experience of his life.

Unlike Frank, who had captured one of the automatics at Marseilles and had actually used a firearm, he had never touched a gun in his life before. But since the pilot had seen the third machine—which he had done some time before Ace Johnson—he had immediately realised the possibility of an attack, and without losing time he had snapped orders to Alan, very similar to those which Ace Johnson had given Frank Mason.

When the message had come from the *Hawk* Alan had the two machine-guns ready, and was prepared any moment for trouble.

Then on receipt of Ace Johnson's orders—or suggestions—the *Swallow* had dived towards the sea or land, out of the range of the attacking 'plane. Alan had sprawled across the cabin at the sudden descent, and before he had managed to pick himself up, Kit Warren had pulled back on the stick and was climbing steeply. It was not long before Alan realised what was going to happen. In the glare of the searchlights he could see the other 'plane and like Frank

Mason he could see the machine-guns opening fire. As he did so Kit Warren snapped an order.

"Man the right-hand gun, Alan!"

Alan needed no second telling. He did not think there was any great difficulty about wielding the machine-gun, for all he had to do was to keep his finger on the trigger and the bullets would fly out.

Very soon bullets from the attacking 'plane had rattled against the under-carriage of the *Swallow*, but the men in it had made one fatal mistake. They had not realised the likelihood of the *Swallow* having weapons.

Alan had waited tensely as the other machine had dropped, waiting for the final order. It came quickly.

"Now!" cried Kit Warren.

Alan had pressed the trigger of the machine-gun, feeling the tremor which ran up his arm to his shoulder as the bullets snapped out one after the other. Tongues of flame leapt in front of him, and he heard the *tap-tap-tap* of his own machine-gun as well as that of the enemy. Alan knew that all he had to do was to keep firing while there was a possibility of hitting the other 'plane, and Kit Warren would look after the manœuvring for position.

Kit Warren was a past master at air fighting, and he went into battle with his eyes gleaming. He was quick to realise that the *Swallow* was a much more easily manœuvrable machine than

the enemy 'plane, and he circled round it rapidly, while all Alan had to do was to keep pumping lead into the other cabin.

Unlike Frank Mason, Kit could see the four members of the enemy crew clearly. It was obvious that the attackers had not expected such a terrific defence—a defence, in fact, which had turned into attack.

Then in front of Alan's eyes one of the crew threw up his arms and sprawled across a seat, obviously badly hurt!

It was the first time in his life that Alan Blair had wounded a fellow human being, but he felt no compunction. He knew that it was a question of one or the other machines crashing to perdition, and if it was humanly possible he was going to save himself.

And then the other 'plane had managed to get out of the corner into which Kit had forced it, and suddenly began to dive towards the earth. Kit had followed it quickly, while Alan had swivelled his gun round so that he kept firing at the enemy. The *Swallow* lost height quickly, and soon it was obvious to them both that the other 'plane was trying to land.

"Stop firing," Kit ordered, and Alan obeyed. Kit explained a minute later that there was a possibility of taking prisoners, which showed that his mind ran on very similar lines to that of Ace Johnson.

Now the two 'planes were only a thousand feet above the earth, and in a few seconds they would land. Ace Johnson had been quite right when he believed they were flying over land, for they were at the north of Sardinia.

Down, down, down! The two machines roared after each other, and then in the glare of the searchlights Kit Warren saw a comparatively flat stretch of land, and saw the leading 'plane touch it. He swung a little towards the left, and a moment later Alan felt the wheels of the *Swallow* touch the ground. The monoplane bumped along for a few seconds, and then ran steadily along until Kit switched off the engine. Almost side by side the two machines ran along that barren stretch of countryside, while from above them came the *Hawk*. But now they were on the land and not in the air, the enemy 'plane was doing everything it could to keep them off, and its machine-guns were blazing. Even now it was touch and go.

Kit Warren waited with the cabin window of the *Swallow* opened a few inches until he was sure that the engine of the enemy 'plane had stopped, and then he put on the brakes. The *Swallow* quivered to a standstill, and it seemed only a few seconds afterwards that the *Hawk* touched the ground and came to rest on the far side of the enemy 'plane.

Most of the bullets were falling short, but now Kit Warren could afford to get closer. The

enemy were caught, and he did not think there was any serious likelihood of them getting away.

Alan Blair was excited as he climbed out of the aeroplane holding a revolver in his hand. The machine-guns—of the small, rifle-type called *Tommies*—were too heavy for him to handle, but Kit Warren took one as he stepped out after the lad.

Taking cover behind the wing of the *Swallow* he crept as near as he dared, and then treated the enemy to a regular fusilade of shots. For a moment the Turks had stopped firing, but a little further away Kit could hear the deadly *tap-tap-tap* of a machine-gun, and he guessed that Ace Johnson and Frank Mason were doing exactly the same thing as he was.

This was just what was happening, and the men in the enemy 'plane realised that although they had got down safely they were now in a hopeless position.

A moment later Ace Johnson and Kit Warren, from different sides of the monoplane, saw a man walk in front of the machine so that he was shown up very clearly in the glare of its tremendous searchlights. The man was waving a flag, and even in those queer circumstances it was obvious that it was a white one.

Frank Mason spoke first.

"They *have* surrendered!" he exclaimed.

"It looks like it," admitted Ace who was by no means sure that the cunning Oriental would

not take cover behind the white flag and, when their opponents had come far enough, would open fire. "We'd better be careful all the same."

With Kit and Alan approaching from one side, their guns in their hands, and Ace and Frank from the other side, just as well armed, the men in the enemy 'plane realised that it would be madness to break their parole.

In some ways it was an anticlimax and very different from the exciting battle in the air. Frank Mason realised this, yet he could not avoid a feeling of intense excitement. These men were as good as prisoners and the chance of forcing information from them was considerable.

As the four fliers from England reached the monoplane the man with the white flag threw down his gun. Inside the lighted cabin they could see the tall, swarthy-faced man who had played such a large part in their adventures, and the little driver who had turned pilot.

The other two men were strangers, small fellows with dark, yellowish skins, obviously Turks.

The tall, swarthy man was spokesman, however. He climbed without protest from the cabin, his hands in the air. Ace Johnson was taking no chances and he snapped an order to Frank.

"Go and make sure he's got no guns in his pocket."

Frank obeyed and tapped the Turk's pockets. Obviously the man had left his guns behind and the other prisoners had been equally wise.

By this time Kit and Alan were with the others, but in the excitement they hardly worried to greet each other.

Ace Johnson proposed to waste no time.

"Before we go any further," he said to the tall man, "we'd like your name. Then, if you're wise, you'll start talking."

The Turk smiled, and although he was in a hopeless position there was a tinge of mockery in his expression.

"My name is Mustapha Bey," he said. "As for talking—I do not know there is anything I can tell you."

"You can explain why you've carried out these attacks!" snapped Ace.

"Simply because I have been obeying orders," returned Mustapha Bey.

"Whose orders?"

"Whose would you imagine?" demanded the Turk.

Ace Johnson had a job to keep his temper.

"I'm not playing," he said. "If you don't answer quickly you'll wish you had. Whose orders?"

Mustapha Bey was a man of considerable courage, as Frank knew. For one thing the man had limped as he had left the cabin, obviously as a result of the wound which he had received

156 The Flying Turk

that morning. That morning! Was it possible that only twelve hours had passed since the exciting chase in the car?

Despite his courage, however, the Turk realised that Ace Johnson was going to suffer no unnecessary delays and he answered quickly enough now.

"Sud Ben Ali's orders," he said.

"So the man is alive!" It was Frank who cried out.

"Sud Ben Ali is alive all right," said Mustapha Bey. "And he swore that he would kill your father. Moreover, my brave Englishmen, he will force information from your father that will be worth a tremendous amount of money."

Frank and the others gasped at his words. All the time they had suspected Sud Ben Ali had some definite object in view, apart from deliberately murdering Mr. Mason for revenge. Now they needed no telling what that object was. In some way or other Richard Mason had information which was worth a tremendous amount to Sud Ben Ali, the renegade Turk!

"What information is wanted?" snapped Ace Johnson, who seemed cool but who was actually tearing anxious to get off again.

"I can't tell you," said Mustapha Bey frankly. "You can try to persuade me, but it will be quite impossible for me to give you information of which I know nothing."

That was reasonable enough and Ace Johnson put another question very quickly.

"I'll grant you that," he said. "But you can at least tell us this. Where is Sud Ben Ali going with Mr. Mason?"

The thin lips of the Turk curled in derisive mockery.

"I can safely tell you that," he said, "for I have no fear that Sud Ben Ali will be able to take care of you should you be foolish enough to go after him. They are on the way to Herat, to Afghanistan."

To Frank and Alan it seemed that this information was of vital importance. The fact that they knew now where they were likely to find Frank's father seemed to solve all their difficulties. On the other hand, Ace Johnson and Kit Warren had a full knowledge of the neighbourhood about Herat, and they knew that in the mountainous country it would be next to impossible to pull off any rescue without a heavy force of numbers. But the information did at least give them a starting-off point, and Ace was convinced that Mustapha Bey had told him the truth.

Kit Warren, however, was not quite so sure, and he suggested that they searched the cabin of the enemy 'plane and also the pockets of Mustapha Bey. Ace agreed to this course and five minutes later some papers found in Mustapha Bey's wallet proved beyond all question

of doubt that in the hills about ten miles from Herat, Sud Ben Ali had a stronghold. What was much more depressing, however, they learned also that Sud Ben Ali was in command of a powerful, war-like tribe of Afghans.

Ace did not pass this information on to the lads, but he snapped another question to Mustapha Bey.

"Do you know where we are now?" he asked.

"Surely an airman of your ability must know that?" sneered Mustapha Bey. "We are about five miles from Bastia, on the Corsican coast."

Ace nodded, and did not trouble to tell the man that he knew they were in Corsica but had not been sure what part of the country they had landed in.

"Your men will be able to find their way, if I leave them here?" he said.

For the first time Mustapha Bey looked really perturbed. He did not ask questions but he stared hard at the quick-speaking airman.

Ace smiled grimly.

"I propose to take you with me to Herat," he said. "If Sud Ben Ali knows that I have a prisoner he might be inclined to act a little differently. For every injury that he does to Richard Mason, for instance, he will know that you will suffer accordingly. These other fellows of yours are obviously paid assassins, and I want nothing to do with them."

Mustapha Bey looked pale, but he showed no

other sign of fear. Ace Johnson believed that the man would probably be difficult, and consequently he bound his hands and legs very firmly, after sitting him in the cabin of the *Hawk*. The other men were deprived of their arms, but were given some rations which would make sure that they reached a town before they were in danger of starvation. Then, so quickly that both Frank and Alan felt dazed, Ace ordered them back to their respective cabins, and soon the night air was being shattered by the roar of the engines.

Before the take-off Ace had destroyed the wireless of the enemy 'plane, and had taken the plugs from the engines, thus making sure that it would be impossible for the men left behind to fly in pursuit, or to send a warning to Sud Ben Ali.

At long last they could feel absolutely sure that Sud Ben Ali was alive and they had a reasonably good idea of the chances of success.

Frank and Alan were, perhaps, too optimistic. Ace Johnson and Kit Warren were grim and determined. If it was possible for them to effect a rescue they would do so—but they were by no means sure that this venture would not end in disaster.

CHAPTER XV

AT ALEPPO

MR. RICHARD MASON was in the hands of Sud Ben Ali, and within two hours of being taken prisoner he had no doubt that the Turk who had sworn to avenge himself was still alive.

When he had gone to telephone London and make arrangements, everything in the passage had worked out as the others had suspected. Mr. Mason had left the café, and walked a few yards towards the prisoners' room, simply to make sure that they were still there.

He had not seen the two men lurking in the shadows of the passage, and he had been standing by the closed door of the prison when he had been attacked, and a tremendous blow on the head had rendered him unconscious in a few seconds.

The two attackers were Turks, and they moved silently but quickly. One of them searched Mr. Mason's pockets for the key, found it, and released the two prisoners. It was comparatively easy after that for them to go through a side door of the aerodrome field, and make off in a car to the landing field where Sud Ben Ali's machine was waiting.

By the time they had reached the aeroplane Mr. Mason had recovered consciousness and the first thing he had seen was the dark, vengeful eyes of his sworn enemy!

Sud Ben Ali had talked very little, for he was a man of few words. But his manner had proved beyond possibility of doubt that directly he had gathered the information for which he was waiting he would make short shrift of his prisoner. There would be no mercy from Sud Ben Ali!

Frank's father had been bound hand and foot and thrown to the ground, while he had heard Sud Ben Ali rapping instructions to Mustapha Bey and the others. He knew that the Turk was arranging for someone to keep near the aerodrome in order to wait for developments there, and to see what happened to the two lads.

Mr. Mason had made one effort to persuade Sud Ben Ali not to carry out his vengeance on the youngsters. The Turk had merely smiled, a cruel, thin twist of his lips, and Mr. Mason's heart had been very heavy. The one gleam of hope in his mind was that both Ace Johnson and Kit Warren were capable men, good friends, and would probably make sure Alan and Frank were safe, as well as do their best to rescue him from the clutches of the cruel Turk.

Consequently he had not been so worried when he had heard the plans mooted, when

Mustapha Bey and others had gone off, and Sud Ben Ali with two lieutenants had entered the biplane which was soon to start across the skies towards Herat.

Richard Mason was taken into the cabin and fastened to one of the seats. Then the biplane had started off, and for some time the silence in the cabin was undisturbed. Then the wireless had crackled and Mr. Mason had heard the reports. One by one they came through, and he was increasingly worried. First there was the discovery that the two lads and the famous fliers were at the hotel in Marseilles, then that they had started off in the *Hawk* and *Swallow*; and Mr. Mason knew that his son and Alan Blair were in great danger.

He realised to some extent the motives which had persuaded Ace Johnson to allow the youngsters to fly with him, and he understood that Frank would have been extremely difficult to handle in the circumstances. Nonetheless he knew more perhaps than any other man the devilishness of Sud Ben Ali, and he would rather have died himself a hundred times than allow his son or his son's friend to come to him.

It was impossible for him to do anything, however, and consequently he had to wait, getting cramp in his arms and legs, wishing desperately he could do something, yet absolutely helpless. Soon he had heard the radio again and between Sud Ben Ali and Mustapha Bey's aeroplane a

conversation had passed similar to that between the *Hawk* and the *Swallow*. Soon Mr. Mason had realised that Sud Ben Ali was giving instructions for the attack and he had been dreadfully afraid of the results of it.

But for half an hour or more the radio was silent and the Turks as well as the Englishman were tense and worried.

There was no hint as to whether the attackers or the defenders had been successful, but the silence from Mustapha Bey's monoplane suggested that it had met trouble. Nonetheless Richard Mason was dreadfully worried, for he was afraid that his son had been sent crashing in flames.

Very little conversation passed between him and Sud Ben Ali until an hour after the last wireless message. Then Sud Ben Ali, apparently tired of the silence and the inaction, had left his seat and stood above the Englishman.

Then for the first time Mr. Mason realised that there was a double motive in the kidnapping. He had wondered why he had not been shot out of hand, but now Sud Ben Ali enlightened him.

"It has come to my ears," said the Turk, "that you have been with an expedition party in the southern hills of Afghanistan. What have you found there?"

Mr. Mason's lips tightened, and he eyed the Turk without speaking.

Sud Ben Ali's lips twisted.

164 The Flying Turk

"You will be much wiser to tell me," he said. "I have reason to believe that your discoveries are worth a tremendous amount of money, and I propose to profit from them."

Richard Mason's handsome face had not changed its expression.

"One thing is quite certain," he said. "No matter what happens to me I shall never give you the information. That is definite, Ben Ali."

The Turk's smile had been cruel beyond words.

"We shall see," he said. "I expected you to be obstinate, but I wonder if you will be quite so stubborn when I am able to work against your son instead of yourself."

Mr. Mason had paled a little but made no comment. He knew now that if it were humanly possible Sud Ben Ali would kidnap Frank, and that horrors beyond words might be in store for his son. But the secret of the discovery which Mr. Mason and the other members of his expedition party had discovered was too big, too vital, to be passed over to this unscrupulous, murderous Turk.

Yet even then Mr. Mason wondered whether he would be able to hold out if he knew that his son was in Sud Ben Ali's hands.

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For five hours the *Hawk* and the *Swallow* had raced across the skies, the *Hawk* some hundred yards in front of its fellow 'plane.

The Eastern dawn had risen after three hours, casting a strange grey shadow across the world beneath them. Gradually the light had increased, a ball of fire had risen from the East, spreading a golden glow everywhere, tinging the white clouds with red, shining through the windows of the cabins, and lighting on the rocky hills of the country over which they were flying.

The majesty of the sight was something which neither Alan Blair nor Frank Mason would ever forget. But they had very little time for thinking about it. Their minds were working ceaselessly on the problem which confronted them.

The two machines had tremendous power, and the twin engines had hummed without a break, neither one nor the other showing the slightest sign of failing. For five hours at over two hundred and fifty miles an hour the race across the skies had been going on, and now Corsica was nearly thirteen hundred miles behind them and at last they were flying over the mountainous land of Turkey.

They knew, of course, that they would have to fly nearly another two thousand miles before they reached Herat, and despite the tremendous speed at which they were travelling they knew that they would have to have a rest before long. For their part Frank and Alan felt that they could carry on for ever without sleep, but even they realised that the two pilots could not possibly stick at the controls much longer.

166 The Flying Turk

Already they had flown nearly two thousand miles, with the only halt that forced one in Corsica. In the *Hawk Ace* Johnson was looking washed out, although his eyes were as bright as ever.

"Where are you going to land for a rest?" asked Frank.

"We're going to try to get to Aleppo, in Syria. We've just about enough petrol to carry us there—these machines of ours have a tremendous petrol capacity, far greater than any others—and we'll get re-fuelled, snatch a few hours' sleep and carry on to Herat."

Frank nodded thoughtfully.

"It certainly wouldn't be any use for you to get there and be dead tired," he said.

Ace shook his head.

"We shall need all our wits about us to catch Sud Ben Ali," he admitted.

As he spoke Mustapha Bey, who was behind them, grunted. When Frank and Alan glanced round they saw that the Turk was actually smiling!

"I have told you before," said Mustapha Bey in that harsh voice, "that before long you will be wishing you have never heard the name of Sud Ben Ali!"

Frank was tempted to make a hot reply, but Ace Johnson ignored the Turk's jibe and concentrated on the job in hand.

It was much better for them to fly during the

day, although even at that height the sun shining through the thick glass made the cabin very hot. They opened the ventilation holes, but still it was close in the cabin. Frank hardly noticed that, however, for all the time he was wondering what was happening to his father.

In the *Swallow* Alan Blair was paying more attention than Frank to what was going on about him. The white clouds which had heralded the morning had disappeared, and now the sun shone a brazen red in the clear blue heavens. Beneath them the country was hilly, although not mountainous, while here and there tremendous slopes of forests reached to the tops of the hills. He could not see the different colours of the trees, but some patches were lighter than others. The general colour of the land beneath them was a reddish yellow, and Alan knew that the sun was responsible for part of that. Now and again they passed over tiny townships which were small enough even on the land, but from the air looked no more than little clusters of sheds. Alan would have liked to have flown low over the land, so that he could get a better idea of the type of buildings, but he realised that nothing must delay them.

Time passed very quickly, and after another hour and a half's flying the *Hawk* came in sight of Aleppo.

At first it was but a tiny collection of buildings, some dark but mostly white. As the *Hawk*

168 The Flying Turk

neared it, however, its nose pointed downwards, Frank could see that some of the buildings were almost majestic, and that if some parts of the town were crowded, the streets very narrow, other parts were built almost on European standards. Soon they were in sight of the air-field, and it grew rapidly larger. Ace had the joy-stick well down, and the field seem to leap up and hit them. A moment later the wheels of the *Hawk* bumped against the ground, and they ran along for a short distance. Then Ace cut out the throttle and the machine quivered to a standstill.

Less than sixty seconds behind them came the *Swallow*.

Both Alan and Frank were at first intensely excited at the crowd of people that gathered about them. Aleppo was a comparatively large town, with a population of nearly two hundred thousand. But a very large section of this population was native, who lived crowded together in houses which were hardly more than hovels. Some of the natives had rushed to the air-field, despite the frequency with which aeroplanes landed, and the two lads were fascinated by the brown skinned, excited people, some of whom were only dressed in a loin cloth and rough turban, some in long flowing robes of every conceivable colour.

A squadron of native police quickly forced the crowd into order, and a fat, red-faced

Englishman who hurried up to greet the fliers told them that the natives had managed to break through the cordon on one side of the air-field.

"They always will try and rush anyone who lands," said this man, whom Ace Johnson introduced as Major Smithers, one of the members of the white colony at Aleppo. "The devils are always crowding for pennies—they are nearly as bad in an air-field as they are in the sea when a ship arrives!"

"They are a tough crowd, I know," said Ace Johnson.

"Yes, yes!" said Smithers whose voice was very hearty. "Well, Johnson, what job are you on this time?"

"We're giving these youngsters a joy flight," smiled Ace Johnson.

Frank Mason almost busted at the words, for anything less like a joy flight it would have been difficult to imagine. He wondered why Ace was so discreet, but when they had reached the small hotel on the outskirts of the aerodrome they learned the truth.

"Major Smithers is a good sort," said Ace Johnson, "but he must be the most talkative man in all Syria. I've only got to say half a word to him and it will spread all over the country."

"What's his job?" asked Frank.

"He's a representative of a big engineering

firm," said Ace Johnson. "A good fellow, but he is a talker. However, we don't want to worry about Major Smithers now, or anyone. We want to get a few hours' sleep in and then be off again to Herat."

Frank nodded, very serious now. For a moment he had almost forgotten the task in front of them.

"Will it be possible for the biplane to be far ahead of us?" he asked.

"I imagine that they're well behind us," said Ace with a cheerful smile. "I had a talk a few minutes ago with Mustapha Bey, as you know, and he assured me that there was only one capable pilot in the biplane which Sud Ben Ali is using."

Frank's eyes glistened.

"That means he will have to stop somewhere for a rest."

"It does," admitted Ace. "And on top of that, although I don't want to blow my own trumpet, these Turks don't make anything like such good pilots as we do. And don't forget that the biplane can only average about a hundred and eighty miles an hour. My bet is that they are just about at Izmir on the East coast of Turkey."

"Is there any way to find out?" asked Frank.

Ace Johnson chuckled.

"You little devil! he said. "Yes, as soon as I've got you and Alan between the sheets I'm

going to make enquiries. I'll let you know what the report is."

Satisfied with this Frank and Alan took off their outer clothes and slipped between the sheets. The air was hot, and they told themselves that it would be quite impossible for them to sleep. Moreover they were desperately anxious to find out what news Ace Johnson would bring.

Meanwhile Ace Johnson left the hotel—he had made sure that no one knew the real reason for their flight, and knew that aeroplanes were so often arriving at Aleppo that there would be nothing to arouse unusual attention—and went to the local Government offices. The fact that he was so world-famous and had landed at the Aleppo air-field time and time again, meant that he had good friends here, and the official whom he interviewed was able to take him to someone who would get the report of Sud Ben Ali's biplane. The fact that Ace had the registration number was a big thing.

Twenty minutes later Ace Johnson, who had left Kit Warren at the hotel to look after the youngsters, learned that the biplane FZU81K18 had landed at Izmir an hour before the first 'plane had reached Aleppo and that its occupants were at a nearby hotel. One of the occupants, Ace was assured, was a very sick man who was being carried.

He knew that the 'sick' man was none other than Richard Mason, and he was tremendously pleased at the news that they were ahead of the Turks, and that Sud Ben Ali had gone to a hotel and could be relied on to stay there for five or six hours.

That would mean that the Englishmen could reach the stronghold outside Herat before Sud Ben Ali arrived, and there was just a possibility that a surprise attack would succeed. Pleased with this news Ace hurried back to the hotel, and went upstairs.

Kit Warren met him with a grin outside the lads' door.

"They're both fast asleep!" he assured Ace. "The moment their heads touched the pillows they dropped off."

"Let's do the same," said Ace Johnson with a prodigious yawn. "And then we'll start off in eight hours—which will take us to Herat by to-morrow morning."

"And then?" asked Kit Warren.

"And then we've just got to trust to luck and our wits," said Ace Johnson grimly.

Kit nodded, for both airmen realised that they would require a tremendous amount of luck to get them successfully through this affair. But they were taking every possible precaution, and when he had been at the Government official's office, Ace had arranged for several native policemen to stay in or about

the hotel in order to report if anyone suspicious called. Moreover the two bedrooms where the fliers were soon sleeping were watched, as well as both the passages from which the doors opened, and outside the windows.

As it happened no attempt was made to break into the hotel. For once Sud Ben Ali had been outwitted. So far he had no idea where his enemies were staying.

Ace did not know this, but he did know that Mustapha Bey was getting very worried. The Turk had also been lodged at the hotel, and this time precautions were taken to make sure that he did not escape.

At four o'clock Syrian time that afternoon, Ace and Kit were called, and very soon they were at the aerodrome. Kit Warren walked behind Mustapha Bey, prodding a gun in his ribs all the time. Mustapha Bey knew that if he made any effort to escape he would be wounded again, and despite his fear of Sud Ben Ali's wrath he made no effort.

Alan and Kit looked at the engines of their machines, made sure that the tanks were filled, and that the engines had been completely overhauled by the mechanics at the air-field. They were ready to start off again on the last stage of their flight.

Almost at the same moment Sud Ben Ali and his crew had started off from Izmir, with Richard Mason a prisoner in the same way as

Mustapha Bey was a captive in the hands of the English fliers.

Sud Ben Ali knew that he would have to stop again on the Western side of Turkey or in Persia for re-fuelling. Altogether the journey to Herat would take him about fourteen hours. But provided the weather held, the English fliers expected to accomplish their journey in six hours. They would reach Herat, refuel again, and then start out for the stronghold that Sud Ben Ali had in the foothills of the mountains nearby. Altogether they would have about six hours in which to prepare for the arrival of the Turk, but Ace Johnson was by no means sure that it would be enough.

CHAPTER XVI

HERAT!

"COME on, lazybones! You ought to have been up hours ago!"

Alan Blair opened his eyes as he felt a rough hand on his arm, shaking him vigorously. A moment later, half-asleep though he was, he jumped up in alarm and made a sudden dive out of Kit Warren's grip.

"Who the deuce——" he began, and then he saw who it was. He sat up in bed, his face a little sheepish, while Kit Warren sat on the edge of the bed and roared with laughter. The commotion disturbed Frank Mason, who grunted in his sleep and then woke up. His surprise, when he saw Kit laughing so heartily and Alan looking sheepishly at him, was considerable.

"What on earth has happened?" he asked.

Kit Warren managed to control himself.

"I woke Alan up rather roughly," he said, "because he was so fast asleep that only an earthquake could do it properly, and he immediately thought I was Mustapha Bey! If he hadn't seen me in time I swear that he'd have knocked my head off!"

"I—I'm sorry," said Alan. "I had no idea that——"

"Oh, forget it!" said Kit. "It's good to feel that you're so alive. But joking apart it's time you got a move on. We're starting in an hour's time and you want a good meal before you go up again."

Frank and Alan were out of bed in a very short while, and Frank was asking questions even as he grabbed his trousers.

"What time is it? Have you been to the air-field? Where's Ace? I——"

"Oi! One at a time," chuckled Kit. "It's a quarter to five, yes, I have been to the air-field, and Ace is there with Mustapha Bey, looking after the last minute arrangements. We've had our meal, but we decided to let you have as long a sleep as possible."

"I think that's the limit!" exclaimed Alan. "Letting us sleep here while you were doing all the work."

"We're more used to going without a lot of sleep than you are," said Kit. "Stop arguing and hurry downstairs to the breakfast room as soon as you can. I know it's a fine time for breakfast but that's what you'd better call it."

Kit superintended the collection of the lads' clothes and luggage while the two lads were waited on by obsequious Syrian servants in the big dining-room of the hotel. Some people were already having afternoon tea, and the lads could not help but smile at the time they were having their 'breakfast.'

Both of them felt a great deal better now that they had had a good sleep, and they were looking forward with tremendous optimism to the start of the flight. When Kit had finished his jobs he went downstairs and had a cup of tea with the lads. Then he told them just what had been discovered and neither Frank nor Alan could repress their deep-rooted satisfaction.

"What's more," said Kit, "Ace's Government friend has been able to confirm that Sud Ben Ali and his men are still at Izmur."

"Wouldn't it be better to tackle them there?" demanded Frank.

"It might have been," admitted Kit, "but remember we were all dog-tired last night—or early this morning—and we couldn't have done a great deal. I don't doubt that in Izmur Sud Ben Ali has plenty of spies and we'd probably have given ourselves away. Although he's a criminal in his own country he's extremely powerful and doesn't lack friends. I'm quite sure, and so is Ace, that the best place is at his stronghold near Herat."

Neither Frank nor Alan felt justified in raising any further queries and they forgot everything else in the enthusiasm which filled them for the last stage of their rescue flight. It was half-past five when the trio reached the aerodrome to find the *Hawk* and the *Swallow* standing in the open, with their engines running and filling the air with a tremendous roar.

Syrian mechanics were crowding about the machines, putting the finishing touches, while Ace superintended the work and Mustapha Bey was sitting in one of the cabins next to a small, brown-skinned man whom Alan and Frank had never seen before.

"Who is that fellow?" Frank asked Ace.

Ace smiled down at the youngster.

"His name is Morra," he said. "He's a little Egyptian who once served with me when I was in the air force in Egypt. There's a lot of those fellows you can't trust, but this man is absolutely reliable. What's more, he knows the Afghan mountains near Herat much better than I do—in fact he probably knows them almost as well as a native."

A little later Frank and Alan learned that Morra had actually been stationed at Herat with a squadron of the British Air Force, and that he had been invaluable during those days in helping to repress war-like outbreaks of the local tribesmen. Apparently Morra had spent a great deal of his childhood in Afghanistan, which accounted for his unusual knowledge of the district.

Frank and Alan realised that this was extremely valuable and they seemed to feel even more enthusiasm about the prospect of successfully fighting Sud Ben Ali.

As Morra was to fly in the *Hawk*, with Mustapha Bey, Ace Johnson and Frank Mason,

Frank learned a great deal more about the little man than Alan. But Kit Warren was able to tell Alan a great deal.

Soon the two pilots were at the controls. As they eased off the brakes and the machines began to move forward, a goodly crowd of natives and white people gathered about the machines. The natives all crowded by the cabin doors and both Frank and Alan were inspired by the same idea at the same moment.

They opened the windows and threw all their available coppers towards the clamouring natives. To see those dozens of boys, many of whom were practically naked, scrambling for the money was a sight which was absolutely different from anything they had ever seen before. There was something pitiful about it, but the pilots assured them that they were professional beggars and that there was not the slightest need for them to feel self-conscious.

Neither of the lads were able to see which of the natives succeeded in getting the precious pennies, for by the time the scramble was over the crowd had dwindled to a confused heap behind the aeroplanes, and the town of Aleppo was also beginning to recede. As on previous occasions Frank saw that as the aeroplane moved further away the big town looked like a model, set in a large and fully detailed survey map.

180 The Flying Turk

But their chief thought was of the dangers to come and neither looked behind them a great deal.

Thanks to Ace Johnson's friend in Aleppo they were able to get in touch by radio with the Government House and to learn of the monoplane in which Sud Ben Ali and Frank's father were travelling. For the first time they learned that the name of the biplane was the *Ebano*, and somehow it seemed to them both that this information was of considerable importance.

Soon the two machines were out of sight of Aleppo, and flying towards the hills of Persia. It seemed strange to Frank and Alan that they should be flying over these foreign countries, countries which only a short while before had been nothing more to them than names on a map. But there it was and they could not resist a feeling that boundaries were no longer important now that aeroplanes could travel at such tremendous speeds, and the gulf between nations could be so easily bridged.

The airmen took the route from Aleppo to Masul in Irak and then Ace proposed to fly towards Tehran, then over the Great Salt Desert, until they crossed the boundary between Persia and Afghanistan.

He explained to Frank that they took this route because they wanted to be within reasonable distance of a large town, so that should

any trouble develop with their engines they would not be in too hopeless a position.

"Moreover," he said, "it only takes us about a hundred miles out of our course, and we shall probably have to take the detour because of the winds."

"Does that mean there's stormy weather ahead?" asked Frank.

"There's supposed to be a squall blowing from Masul at the moment," admitted Ace. "On the other hand we won't be there for an hour or more and in all likelihood it'll have blown itself out by the time we reach it." He spoke optimistically but for once his optimism was not justified.

After little more than an hour's flying they were within sight of Masul, but by that time they had met the full force of the wind. Ace had called it a squall but in reality it was a gale, and about the two aeroplanes the wind was blowing and squealing as the rain was dropping down in torrents. It was the first time that Frank or Alan had been in the air during bad weather and neither of them could resist a feeling of nervousness when they watched the fury of the elements. They were forced to fly low, less than two thousand feet over the rocky earth, for the lowering clouds were scudding above them, almost black. Now and again they were compelled to fly through swirling patches of clouds which dropped even

182 The Flying Turk

lower, and in those moments they seemed to be flying into a thick wall of fog.

After the first quarter of an hour in which the *Hawk* was forced to dip up and down as it was caught in vicious air pockets, Frank began to feel more at home. His first reaction had been to feel afraid, but when he saw the calm way in which Mustapha Bey and Morra took this development, he realised that it was nothing out of the ordinary.

Ace had not spoken, for he wanted to see what Frank was likely to do in such an emergency. But when he saw the lad looking comparatively happy he said calmly:

"This is nothing to worry about, Frank. I've been through a lot worse than this blow time and time again. The trouble comes if something goes wrong with the engines, and you're fighting both the storm and the machine. This time there doesn't seem to be anything to worry about."

Certainly the engines of the two monoplanes had done their work well. Not once during the hour of their flight through the worst storm that Frank and Alan had ever experienced did they falter. At last the clouds began to drop behind them and ahead of them stretched a tremendous expanse of clear blue sky, with the sun setting fast in the Western heavens.

"That's that," said Ace with a chuckle. "We weren't forced out of our course much

and another hour will see us over the Great Salt Desert."

For hour after hour the monoplane roared on, heading almost due east towards the boundary of Afghanistan and Persia, and the Afghan town of Herat. Darkness was beginning to fall before they came in sight of the first mountains which reared their majestic heads towards the skies. The sun was setting, creating an even more wonderful spectacle than it had upon rising that morning. Now they were flying over the hills and vales, but there was little or no greenery, for the mountains of that part of Persia were all rocks, some tinged brown and yellow, others looking almost black. But the setting sun shed a blaze of glory over the countryside, and there seemed a thousand colours merging into one as Frank and Alan looked out of their respective windows.

Even the urgent motive of their journey was temporarily forgotten as they looked down on that mighty spectacle with eyes of wonder. Never again would they see such a glorious sight, for the whole country seemed to be tinged with a dark red that changed slowly to purple. Frank had heard of the short dusks in that part of the world, but he learned then that twilight lasted for ten to fifteen minutes. although complete darkness did come much quicker than ever in England.

184 The Flying Turk

Then they were flying through the darkness again, but once more the weather was kind to them and they could see the stars shining brightly in the heavens, and the wind had practically dropped even at the height of ten thousand feet where they were flying.

On and on they went, and the clock in the control board—which had been set to local time when they had left Aleppo—pointed to midnight.

“How much longer?” asked Frank.

“I think we should be dropping in another ten minutes,” said Ace Johnson.

He was true to his word and twelve minutes later they dropped down on the Afghan town of Herat, with the *Swallow* only a few moments behind them. Frank marvelled at the fact that despite the darkness the two aeroplanes had managed to keep so close together.

Herat was a much smaller town than Aleppo, with a population of about thirty thousand people most of whom, of course, were Afghans. But Ace Johnson had radioed news of his flight ahead, and three men from the British Government building were at the airfield to welcome the fliers.

None of them knew just what the object was, and they asked no questions.

Frank and Alan were glad to get out and stretch their legs and little Morra was equally pleased. Mustapha Bey, without being tied

or bound, was allowed to walk about the aerodrome with Morra in his wake, a gun in the Egyptian's pocket. Morra certainly did not propose to allow Mustapha Bey to make a break for escape.

Once again the petrol tanks of the two monoplanes were being filled, and while this was being done and the aerodrome mechanics were tightening up nuts and screws which had necessarily become loose during the flight, Ace and the others went to the club-house with the three Englishmen.

Frank and Alan were introduced to them but the spokesman was the most important one of the trio. His name was Withers—John Withers—and he was a tall, clear-cut looking man whose bronzed face was very similar to Ace Johnson's.

"Well, Ace," he said cheerfully, "don't tell me you've come over here for a bit of fun. I've followed your flight with interest from Marseilles."

"Have you, by Jove!" said Ace Johnson, "have you followed the other fellow too?"

"Which other fellow?" asked Mr. Withers, and Alan and Kit laughed—for if the Englishman knew that they had been making record time, he certainly knew nothing of their objective.

Ace Johnson knew that he could trust this man.

186 The Flying Turk

"I'm not going to waste time," he said, "because I'm in a hurry. So I'll tell you briefly what's happened and what brought me here."

He did as he promised, speaking very quickly and relating only the most important points in that story. Withers and the other two men looked startled when the kidnapping of Mr. Mason was explained, but none of them seemed particularly surprised.

What was important they knew the name of Sud Ben Ali very well.

"We had an idea he was in the hills somewhere," said Withers, "but we were not certain where. You fancy that with this fellow Mustapha Bey you'll be able to locate him?"

Ace nodded grimly.

"I'm quite sure we will," he said. "Our trouble is not so much locating the place, but to get Mr. Mason away."

"Naturally you are looking for help?" asked Withers.

"If I can get it," admitted Ace Johnson. "Of course, I have no idea at the moment how powerful Sud Ben Ali's tribe is."

"You can be pretty sure it's a big one," said Withers seriously. "Look here, Ace, as a representative of the British Government I can't do anything officially, but I can put you in touch with a man who is always on the lookout for trouble. When we have a spot of bother with Afghan tribes we nearly always

employ this fellow, and he behaves himself fairly well. For a couple of hundred pounds he would probably be able to put several hundred armed men at your disposal."

Ace Johnson's eyes gleamed, Kit Warren exclaimed with satisfaction, and the eyes of the two lads brightened. It seemed to them that every development promised to help a little more with the task in front of them.

"Who is the man?" asked Ace quickly.

"His name is Raj Waisi," said Withers. "I believe he's actually staying in Herat tonight. If you will come with me I'll try and get him to talk with you. But I warn you he's a pugnacious old devil, and it may be that he's got some stunt of his own which will prevent him from doing anything for you."

"If the money's big enough," said Ace Johnson, "I don't doubt he'll help us. Come on, lads, we're going to interview an Afghan Chief and see what he can do."

CHAPTER XVII

THE STRONGHOLD

ACE JOHNSON and John Withers lost no time and they hurried from the aerodrome, leaving the two lads and Kit Warren behind. Frank and Alan could scarcely control their excitement at the fact that after this amazing chase there was a possibility of joining an armed band in an assault on the stronghold which they had heard so much about.

Had it been during the day Kit Warren would have suggested that they went for a walk about the narrow streets of the Afghan town, but it was pitch dark, and very few people were up and about. Only the fact that he had known the fliers were anxious to lose no time had made John Withers and his two friends stay up. Frank did not mind, however, but the time dragged very slowly.

Was it possible that this warlike Afghan chieftain would agree to fight for them? Or would they be disappointed at the last moment?

Over an hour passed before Ace Johnson returned. When at the last the footsteps of the returning men were heard outside, Frank and Alan both jumped up and met the others at the door. It needed only a glance at Ace

Johnson's face to know what had happened.

"He's coming!" he burst out.

"He is!" cried Ace Johnson. "And what's more he knows Sud Ben Ali's hang-out. Apparently Sud Ben Ali and this man Raj Waisi have had more than one real squabble, and the Raj hardly needed the inducement of money to persuade him to make a raid."

"Is everything planned?" exclaimed Alan Blair excitedly.

"Very nearly," said Ace Johnson. "But you don't half expect to rush things, don't you?"

Kit Warren spoke next, and from his words it was obvious that he was just as anxious to get information as the two lads.

"Stop fooling, Ace. What happened?"

"I've told you what kind of reception we got," said Ace Johnson, "although if you'd seen that man getting up in the middle of the night you'd have had one of the laughs of your life! Waisi is a tremendous fellow, six foot six inches in height and terrifically broad. He has a beard, too, which reaches halfway down his chest and I've never seen such a ferocious specimen of humanity in my life!"

"But what did he say?" demanded Kit.

Ace chuckled, and Frank had an idea that Ace himself was extremely excited.

"As soon as I mentioned the name of Sud Ben he went up in the air," said Ace. "He

talks a bit of English and we were able to get along all right. He tells me that this stronghold is about fifteen miles due north of Herat, and if he moves his men up there right away they can surround the place before dawn."

"Good business!" exclaimed Kit. "You certainly aren't going to lose any time."

"There's no time to lose," said Ace Johnson, and his seriousness made itself apparent at that moment. "Thank goodness we had a good rest this afternoon."

Until that moment the man named Withers had made no comment since their return, but now he looked at the two lads with a thoughtful smile.

"You need not worry about the youngsters," he said. "We'll make sure they are all right."

Apparently it had not occurred to him that Frank and Alan expected to join the expedition, but he had a shock when he saw the expression on the two young faces.

"Look here," cried Alan, forgetting himself for a moment. "We have come all the way from Marseilles, and we have been in everything so far. We're not going to back out now."

Frank looked at Ace Johnson.

"You won't want us to stay behind, will you?"

For a moment Ace Johnson hesitated. He realised that it would be much wiser if John

Withers' suggestion was adopted, but he also understood the tremendous disappointment that was likely to result if the youngsters were not allowed to travel to the stronghold. Once again he was forced to make a quick decision, and although he was by no means sure he was wise he made it in favour of the lads.

"I don't think it would be fair to leave them behind," he said. "You won't mind, Withers?"

Withers was so surprised that all he could do was to laugh.

"Well—it's the last thing I expected," he said. "But if these young hopefuls want to run their heads into trouble it's no business of mine."

Ace had not properly explained the reason for the lads' journey, but when the story was told Withers was more able to understand what had inspired Alan's protest.

Less than half an hour after Ace and John Withers had returned to the aerodrome, they started out again this time with the others in their little group. Withers had a large touring car in which everyone but Morra and Mustapha Bey were able to travel, and one of the other Englishmen had a small car which he drove, and thus enabled Morra to look after the prisoner in the rear.

Frank and Alan had no idea how far they were going but they did know that John

Withers' servants had prepared provisions which had been bundled into the car, and they realised that they were actually at the start of the last stage in this great adventure.

The two cars travelled along the road for perhaps eight miles, by which time they were among the foothills. Once or twice both cars found it impossible to make the steep gradients. At last they reached a clearing which they could see easily in the white light of the moon, and the two cars pulled up. The occupants climbed out quickly, and John Withers approached Ace.

"I'm not going to stay with you," he said, "because it's essential there should be nothing official about this business. But you need telling that I wish you all the luck in the world."

"I know you do," said Ace.

The two men shook hands firmly and the three Englishmen returned in the two cars. Not until then did Ace Johnson give the two lads two automatics apiece, and revealed the fact that among the luggage were the four machine-guns taken from the *Hawk* and the *Swallow*.

"Now we're all set," he said. "We're waiting here for a guide from Raj Waisi and as soon as he comes we'll start. From what I can make out it'll take us about two hours to reach the stronghold, and with any luck we'll be there

The Stronghold 193

three or four hours before Sud Ben Ali. And then we can look out for fireworks!"

Ace had only just finished explaining the situation to Frank when several dark figures materialised out of the gloom. Frank started in surprise, but it was soon observed that the newcomers were friendly disposed.

It was now that Morra became invaluable. Neither of the Englishmen knew the Afghan tongue, but the little Egyptian was as fluent in it as he was in his own language.

After what had seemed to Frank and Alan a meaningless jabber of tongues Morra turned to Ace and translated quickly.

"They are the guides from Raj Waisi," he said. "They wish us to start immediately, and they have warned us to be fully armed."

"We're armed all right," said Ace Johnson. "All right, Morra, tell them we're ready now."

Thus it was that a few moments later the oddly assorted party started out for the stronghold of the notorious Sud Ben Ali. In the darkness it was impossible for either lad to see much and, in fact, as they walked along in the wake of the others it seemed impossible that anyone could see their way clearly through these rocky paths. Now and again huge boulders seemed to loom out of the darkness and twice Frank stubbed his foot painfully. Alan had even worse luck, for he knocked against a large stone and went sprawling with a clatter created

by rubble which he had knocked down the hillside. Immediately there was a muttering hiss of sibilant voices, and Alan realised that the natives were warning him to go carefully. Carefully!

The two lads were beginning to feel that this was a nightmare, for they were walking along without being able to see; somewhere a few yards away was Ace, who was immediately in front of them, yet they were unable to see even his outline against the darkness. From the way in which the stones had rattled down the hillside it seemed to them that the slope was very steep, and that it would be terrible if they missed their footing.

Obviously it was foolish for them even to think a little about the possibility of falling, but in that eerie darkness it was hard for them to keep their thoughts off the possibility of accidents.

All the time the path rose upwards, growing more rocky with every few yards. Frank and Alan were making a continual noise on the loose stones and rubble beneath their feet, but they were relieved to know that Ace in front of them, and Kit Warren behind them, were creating just as much disturbance. Yet the natives seemed to be able to see in the darkness, and were walking absolutely silently, without creating the slightest murmur of sound. This somehow added to the weirdness of the experi-

ence, and the silence was beginning to get on the youngsters' nerves. They wondered whether by any chance the natives on Sud Ben Ali's side had heard of the approach, and he dreaded to think of what might happen if a sudden surprise attack was made on them.

Frank Mason, always the more imaginative of the two lads, was thinking more about this than Alan, but Alan found the experience strange and worrying enough. It would not have been so bad had they been able to see about them, but the silence coupled with the impenetrable darkness was beginning to tear their nerves to fragments.

Somehow they managed to keep control of themselves, and they went on and on, rarely stopping even for a breather. Both Frank and Alan were in good physical form, but the demands of this climb on their strength were tremendous. After all, they were competing with natives who had been born and bred in the hills, and who could probably march for two or three days almost without sleep and very little food.

On and on; would this never come to an end?

They lost all count of time and both of them had a dreadful feeling that they were lost. It was absurd, but the two men must have realised something of what the youngsters were feeling, for Ace occasionally stopped to

196 The Flying Turk

exchange a word or two, while Kit would sometimes hurry towards them and catch up with the youngsters for the same purpose.

But it was over at last.

The final stages of their sortie from Herat were the most difficult. They climbed up the rocky hillside, sometimes squeezing between boulders which brushed against them on both sides. The sharp rocks and stones over which they walked tore at their shoes. Frank jabbed his ankle on one and grazed it painfully.

But not by word or deed did either lad complain, for they realised that they themselves had insisted on making this journey and no matter what happened they would not allow the others to think they were not strong enough to face whatever lay ahead of them.

Then unexpectedly they found their feet treading on flat, clear ground. A moment or two later they heard Ace Johnson whisper:

"Ease up, young fellows. We've arrived."

Frank and Alan were tremendously relieved, and they wondered whether there would be a possibility of getting a few moments sit-down to rest their legs and feet. One of Raj Waisi's guides approached them, and after another muttered conversation with Morra the two Englishmen and the lads were led away towards a spot where Raj Waisi was staying himself.

They had one of the biggest surprises of their lives.

The earth was still smooth but they had to squeeze through a long passage, or chasm, in the rocks, and they wondered just where they were going. As they pushed through, however, they saw a faint glow of light and a few minutes later they found themselves in a tremendous cavern, which must have been thirty feet high and certainly a hundred feet long. In the cavern were dozens of natives, all squatting round a small fire. At the far end was a larger fire than any of the others, and five bearded Afghans were sitting round it. Neither Frank nor Alan needed telling which of the three men was Raj Waisi. He was a tremendously ferocious-looking fellow, with a beard which must have stretched a foot from his chin! He was dressed in colourful robes, and sat on a bundle of cushions which made Frank and Alan almost green with envy. There was no need for that, for Raj Waisi clapped his hands and two almost naked black servants, who had been standing behind him, darted away. They appeared again with bundles of cushions, from some hidden recess, on which the youngsters and the two airmen sunk with relief.

Frank and Alan heard Raj Waisi speak in excellent English, although his words were a little stilted and his voice very harsh. When Ace had said his English was poor he must have been dreaming.

"You are welcome, gentlemen," he said. "You had a good journey?"

"I would hardly call it good," said Ace Johnson with a smile. "But we certainly arrived here safely. Your men are wizards among the hills."

"My warriors have to be wizards," said Raj Waisi. "Or they cease being warriors."

He looked away from Ace and stared at Frank and Alan for a moment, his beard splitting in a wide smile which revealed surprisingly white teeth.

"And so these are the two young boys of such courage," he said. "Courage is a thing which Raj Waisi always admires."

Frank and Alan smiled a little diffidently and could not help wondering when the real business of their journey was going to start. They did not realise that with Afghans and Indians a certain parley was always necessary. As it happened Raj Waisi was a man of much more decisive action than many of the Afghan chieftains, and less than a quarter of an hour after they had reached the cavern he clapped his hands, and the servants rushed forward to collect the cushions on which they had been sitting.

"You will follow me," he said, "and see the stronghold of Sud Ben Ali. It is so very near—that unpleasant gentleman would be most shocked to know that I was so near."

With another beaming smile Raj Waisi turned round, and the others followed him in the opposite direction to the entrance through which they had arrived. This time they were walking for only a few minutes, although once again they had to force their way through a narrow, low passage, which made them wonder how on earth a man of Raj Waisi's colossal size could possibly squeeze through.

But they were standing on the hillside again at last, and now to their surprise they found themselves hurrying downwards towards a hundred small fires, which seemed to be dotted about at random. The nearest could not be more than half a mile away from them. As they stared, the red glow from the fires gradually revealed the walls and the shapes of buildings ahead of them.

"It looks like a fortress!" exclaimed Alan Blair in an undertone.

Softly though the words were spoken Raj Waisi heard them and he turned round to the youngsters.

"It is a fortress," he said. "One which I have wanted for many years. And now you have given me a good opportunity for taking it. Are you agreed, Mr. Johnson, that I shall stage my attack immediately the vulture of the skies appears?"

"I want you to start it immediately the aeroplane has landed, yes," said Ace Johnson.

"Of course it will land inside the walls, but I shall be able to see it from here, although unseen," said the chieftain. "And I will arrange for my men to approach the walls, keeping under cover all the time. You need have no fear our errand will be crowned with success."

Neither of the lads knew whether Raj Waisi was talking boastfully by habit, or whether he really believed that the errand would be so successful. Without another word to them he stalked away, a majestic figure against the dull red glow of Sud Ben Ali's fires.

He had not been gone more than ten minutes when Frank heard something which made him frown. A few seconds later Alan went very stiff, and muttered aloud:

"Can you hear something?"

"I thought I heard a droning," admitted Frank.

"So did I," said Alan. "I——" and then he broke off.

Both of them were staring into the skies, and suddenly they saw what appeared at first sight to be a star moving rapidly towards them. All the time the droning sound grew louder, and at last they were convinced that their suspicions were right.

The aeroplane, with Sud Ben Ali and Mr. Richard Mason had arrived much more quickly than they had expected!

Ace Johnson and Kit Warren suddenly materialised out of the darkness.

"They're here," said Ace. "Now we must be ready for anything."

It seemed hardly a moment later when the aeroplane, visible only by its navigation lights, began to lose height. Now Frank and Alan were able to understand what the fires were inside the stronghold. They represented the landing flares without which it would have been impossible for the Turk to land.

Now the air was filled with the tremendous roar of the biplane's powerful engine. Down and down it went until suddenly they saw the fires blotted out, as the machine flew past them. Only a few seconds later the great engine was silenced and the hush which followed seemed ominous.

Then, very shrill upon the silence, came a piercing whistle. Before it had stopped the hill-side seemed to swarm with fast-moving, black-robed figures, all of them carrying knives and rifles.

The attack had started!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BATTLE

THE thing had come to a head so suddenly that both Alan and Frank were taken by surprise. They had expected to wait in the cavern or on the spot where they were now standing, for an hour or two, and they found it difficult to understand how Sud Ben Ali's biplane had managed to make the journey from Izmir to the stronghold in such a short time.

Kit Warren and Ace Johnson felt just as surprised, but they spent little time in thinking. For that matter, after their short rest the two lads were feeling much fitter, and the sudden excitement which followed the arrival of the aeroplane drove away all thought of fatigue. Suddenly the man reached them and began to jabber to Morra.

"He says," said the little Egyptian, "that Raj Waisi has gone to lead the attack, and that it is starting now. You can follow or stay here as you wish."

"We're following," snapped Ace Johnson. "Is this man a guide?"

"He says the road down now is very smooth," said Morra.

"Then we'll have to take his word for it," snapped Ace Johnson. "Come on, young 'uns—don't wander right or left but just follow me."

Raj Waisi might have considered the road easy, but actually it was a steep decline from the top to the bottom. On the other hand it was comparatively smooth, and half-falling and half-running the four people from England reached the comparatively flat land which stretched perhaps a hundred yards from the walls of Sud Ben Ali's stronghold.

Now the hillside was bedlam! Ahead of them hundreds of warriors were racing towards the walls of the stronghold, and there was a ceaseless crackle of rifle fire both to and from Sud Ben Ali's fortress. Flashes of yellow flame added to the light of the fires, and now there was a pale red glow which enabled them to see practically everything that was going on about them.

Now and again members of the attacking forces who had been hiding in the steep slopes of the hills rushed past the Englishmen, going so fast that it seemed impossible they could keep their feet. They were firing as they went, and added to the din of the shots were their high-pitched, wild screams.

The battle was on with a vengeance!

The shouting tribesmen seemed like wild dervishes in some fantastic dance. Not for a moment did they stop screaming and screeching, and their cries echoed about the hillside until it

seemed like a continuous high-pitched wail. The firing was incessant, not so regular as machine-gun-fire, but much more furious.

The attack had been a surprise up to a point, but obviously the men whom Sud Ben Ali ruled had been prepared for a possible attack, and the defence had not been caught napping. Natives lined the walls of the stronghold, behind little mounds which had been built along the walls, firing quickly at the invading hordes.

Of necessity, the men from England were well behind the attackers at the start, and they saw the way in which the tribesmen flung themselves into the attack without any thought of personal danger. Somewhere in that seething horde was the Raj, leading his men with tremendous heroism.

Frank Mason told himself that there was something more in this affair than there had appeared on the surface. No one would fight like this simply for money.

Later he knew that between the tribe over which Sud Ben Ali ruled and the warriors of Raj Waisi there was a deep-rooted enmity, and that from time to time the two tribes would engage in battle. For a long time past Raj Waisi had—as he had told them—played with the idea of raiding the stronghold, and possessing it for himself. He had gradually been increasing the strength of his army, but his biggest trouble had been ammunition and arms.

A very large amount of ammunition would be used in the attack and without money he would be unable to replenish his store, and therefore he would probably have been defeated in a second battle. Now that he had been offered big money by the Englishmen he could afford to fight and know that he would have ammunition in plenty to defend the stronghold once he had captured it.

Luck had enabled the Englishmen to purchase more than armed forces—but to obtain the help of men who were deadly enemies of Sud Ben Ali and his warriors.

It might have seemed to some people that to have caused a battle like this to rescue one man was criminal. But there was more in it than that. Sud Ben Ali and his men had for a long time past been proving a thorn in the side of the Afghan rulers, while Sud Ben Ali was a murderer, and wanted in several countries. His power was considerable and he would stop at nothing to gain his own ends. On top of that there was the fact that this battle would have come about sooner or later, and it merely happened that the Englishmen were able to take advantage of the situation.

None of these thoughts passed through the minds of the two Englishmen and their brave young companions. They raced onwards, automatics in hand, prepared to join in the assault.

As they drew nearer the walls bullets hummed about them, but the firing was too haphazard to do much damage. Now and again a man near them would let out an even higher shriek than usual, fling up his arms and fall forward on his face. Sometimes men who were foolish enough to show themselves above the parapet of the fortress would fall back mortally wounded. The fury of the battle was beyond words to describe. The natives on both sides were filled with hatred which had been smouldering for years, but now nothing mattered but victory.

Fifty yards from the wall were several large boulders, very clear in the pale glow of the fires and the fighting. Ace Johnson started towards them, the others following, to take shelter behind the boulders where they would be safe for the moment from flying bullets.

"Find out where the main entrance is," said Ace to Morra. "Or find out where the chief attack is coming."

"It shall be done," said Morra and he darted off towards the walls, absolutely fearless. For perhaps five minutes Ace and Kit with the two youngsters crowded behind the boulders, while all the time Frank was feeling dreadfully anxious about his father's fate.

What would happen if Sud Ben Ali suspected this battle had been caused by the Englishmen, and revenged himself on Richard Mason?

Luckily Frank had little time to think about

that possibility for in less than ten minutes Morra was back again, his brown face beaming.

"Raj Waisi says you are to come to him," he said.

"Lead the way," said Ace Johnson.

They left their cover and went fearlessly in the wake of the little Egyptian. They raced for perhaps two hundred yards, and then they found themselves in the middle of a huge crowd of natives, and a little way ahead of them they saw the towering figure of Raj Waisi.

Obviously if the chieftain wanted them they should get near him. He was too busy during the battle to spare time for talking. No conversation was necessary, however, for Ace Johnson took in the situation at a glance. The warrior tribesmen were massing for the attack here, and already huge battering rams were being crashed against the gates of the fortress. Fully two dozen men were at each ram, which were the trunks of trees from which the branches had been lopped. Like human machines they raced towards the gates, crashing their ram with terrible force against it, and then drawing back while a second team of rammers rushed up for a second assault. The big gates were creaking and groaning under the strain, and it was soon obvious that they would not be able to withstand the assault much longer.

Keeping close together the four fliers drew nearer to the gates, making sure that they

kept a little to one side and out of the way of the rammers. A dozen times a ram had thudded against the gate, creating a roar like thunder. On the thirteenth effort the gate fell! There was a roar from the frenzied natives and with a shout which echoed through the mountain side Raj Waisi flung himself forward at the head of his men.

"This is where we make it," snapped Ace. "Keep together all the time and look for the aeroplane."

Pushed and hustled about by the natives the little party of four forced their way through into the stronghold about which they had heard so much. Inside Sud Ben Ali's fortress the scene was almost indescribable. The men were engaged now in hand to hand combat, shooting had practically ceased, and wicked looking knives were flashing. Now the shouting had practically died but the sound of thudding footsteps and scuffling filled the air.

Ace seemed to go instinctively towards the middle of the fortress, and it was not long before they managed to force their way through the struggling natives to the aeroplane which was standing in the middle of the teeming crowd.

Was it possible that Mr. Mason was inside?

A few minutes later Frank realised that this good fortune was denied them. The cabin of the machine was empty, and there was no one within ten yards of it.

Ace lost no time.

"Inside!" he snapped to Kit. "See if there's any machine-gun."

Less than thirty seconds later Kit Warren bellowed above the general confusion:

"Two guns here, Ace!"

Once again Frank Mason and Alan Blair were able to see one of the reasons why Ace Johnson had achieved the fame that he had. He took little or no time to reach a decision, and even as he spoke he flashed a smile.

"All right, Kit. You stay in the cabin and keep Alan. Fight the devils off if it looks like being nasty. We're going to find Mason."

Gripping Frank's arm, he turned away from the biplane and forced a passage once again through the fighting, grunting natives. It was impossible for them to tell which way the battle was going, for everything was an indescribable confusion. Then suddenly Frank saw the tremendous figure of Raj Waisi, in the middle of a seething crowd and obviously hard pressed. He was gripping a rifle by the barrel and swinging it round in circles, thus contriving to clear a space about him and preventing the natives from stabbing at him with their knives.

As Frank sighted the scene, he saw a fellow on the edge of the crowd raise his rifle and take careful aim at the Afghan chieftain. In that moment Frank did not hesitate. So far neither

he nor his friends had taken any actual part in the fighting for they wanted to get at Richard Mason. But Frank could not allow the man who had been such an invaluable help to them to die like that.

It happened so quickly that he had no time even to speak to Ace Johnson. He raised his gun and pulled the trigger. As the bullet pecked into the back of the man who was about to shoot Raj Waisi, the rifleman dropped his gun and fell writhing to the ground.

"Good work!" snapped Ace.

Frank said nothing, but followed his friend towards Raj Waisi, who was still hard pushed. Now he and Ace were firing, forcing some of the attacking crowd away from the chieftain. At first Raj Waisi hardly seemed to realise what was happening, but suddenly a band of his own men reached the spot and sent the enemy flying in all directions.

Not until then did Raj Waisi rest his gun and look at the Englishmen.

"That is good," he said. "You saved my life. For Sud Ben Ali you will follow me."

Frank had no time to be astonished at the fact that, despite the heat of the battle, Raj Waisi had seen him shoot. What he did realise was that Raj Waisi was now heading for Sud Ben Ali's quarters, and he knew that in all probability his father would be in the same place.

Ace realised the same thing and together they joined the band of fierce warriors who were following Raj Waisi towards the buildings a hundred yards away. The party was fifty strong and it literally carved a way through the struggling natives, reaching the building in less than a minute.

And then Frank Mason stood dead still, staring at the front of the building, filled at once with a tremendous feeling of triumph and a deep fear.

For on the steps his father was standing, his hands bound behind him, his clothes torn, his face streaked with blood. Next to him was a man almost as big as Raj Waisi, a man who held guns in both hands, and was emptying them into the attacking crowd.

He had hardly seen the man when he heard Ace Johnson snap:

"That's Sud Ben Ali!"

At long last Frank Mason actually saw the man who had caused all this trouble and fighting. Sud Ben Ali was being hard-pressed, but Mr. Mason was in a terrible predicament. For bullets were flying about Sud Ben Ali's head—and the Englishman was only a couple of yards away. It looked as though Sud Ben Ali's life was nearly over, and the chances of his father dying were just as acute.

Frank did not speak, nor did Ace Johnson. With one accord they leapt forward, forcing

their way through the crowd, trying desperately to reach the man on the steps. But even as they fought their way they were dreadfully afraid that they had come too late.

Too late——

CHAPTER XIX

THE RESCUE

RICHARD MASON had not thought it possible there was any chance of rescue after the biplane had started out from Izmir on the Turkish coast. He had learned, meanwhile, that Sud Ben Ali had spies all along the route, and when the *Hawk* and the *Swallow* had landed at Aleppo, Sud Ben Ali had been advised.

The information which had been given to the Turkish officials and passed on to Ace Johnson was false. It was true up to a point that Sud Ben Ali and the 'sick' man had gone to a hotel, but they had stayed for only a short while.

The renegade Turk had realised that there was little or no chance of losing his prisoner if once he reached the stronghold. Or that, at least, was what he believed. He had been anxious to get to Herat well ahead of the other fliers, and consequently he had lost little or no time in Izmir or Aleppo, where he had landed a short while before.

As luck would have it the biplane had suffered from engine trouble, and a forced landing had been necessary, while running repairs were made. In consequence of this Sud Ben Ali and his men had reached the stronghold some time after the rescue party.

Sud Ben Ali had believed that the others were in front of him, but he had not been sure whether Ace Johnson had made any plans for getting to the stronghold. When he had landed everything had seemed quite normal, and there had been no difficulty in taking the biplane down on the landing field, which had been specially prepared inside the walled fortress. Then, before he had left the biplane, the attack by the hostile tribesmen had started.

At first Sud Ben Ali had been inclined to believe that this attack was unconnected with the Englishmen, for he knew of the enmity of Raj Waisi.

But it was not long, however, before some of his men had sighted the Englishmen with the attacking party and Sud Ben Ali had realised that he was in danger of fighting a losing battle.

His first temptation had been to shoot Richard Mason out of hand. But there was that information which the Englishman possessed and which Sud Ben Ali wanted more than he had ever wanted anything in his life before.

The information would be worth a tremendous amount of money, probably running into several hundred thousands of pounds. It was worth fighting to the last in an effort to obtain it, and consequently he rushed towards the small building which represented his headquarters while he was in Afghanistan.

Before he had reached the house, however,

the attacking natives had battered down the gate of the stronghold, and in a few minutes the battle had been raging inside the walls. As a result Sud Ben Ali had found it almost impossible to force his way through the surging, fighting crowds, and even when he had reached the doors of the building, he had found it impossible to gain admission.

Every male servant on the premises had gone to enter into battle in that last desperate effort to save the stronghold.

Sud Ben Ali had battered on the doors of the house, but he had roused no reply. He had stood there for a few moments with Richard Mason helpless by his side.

Few people had noticed the leader of the enemy at first, for the heat of the fighting was too great. Soon, however, Sud Ben Ali had found himself surrounded by hostile warriors, and his own men were fighting furiously to save him. Then he had seen Ace Johnson and Frank Mason only twenty yards away.

At the same moment Richard Mason saw his son and his friend, and although he was terribly afraid for Frank, a tremendous hope surged through him. There was still the possibility that Sud Ben Ali would lose, still a chance that he would escape, alive and well, from the terrible predicament in which he found himself.

The next few minutes would tell.

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For a few seconds Frank Mason hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or his heels. Not for a moment had he dreamed of seeing his father in those circumstances, and although he knew the deadly danger with which they were surrounded he could not repress a feeling of triumph and optimism.

Then Sud Ben Ali moved—a typical ruse and one which seemed as though it could only end in disaster for Richard Mason.

The Turk was tremendously strong, and he was armed, while Richard Mason was in a bad way and without a weapon of any kind. The Turk darted across the top of the steps, gripped the Englishman's right wrist, and forced Richard Mason in front of him!

Frank saw what had happened, and his heart seemed to freeze.

Sud Ben Ali was using his father as a shield! It would be impossible for any of the others to shoot Sud Ben Ali without first wounding his father, and although he and Ace Johnson would refrain from shooting they could not be sure whether the frenzied natives would do the same. Even at the last Sud Ben Ali had managed to twist the circumstances to his own advantage.

For the first time Frank spoke.

"What can we do now?" he muttered, and his anxiety was apparent in his voice.

"Steady," muttered Ace Johnson. "We'll get towards him."

As he spoke he gripped Frank's arm, and advanced slowly toward the couple on the steps, his gun in his right hand all the time.

Frank also held a gun, but he knew that it would be madness for him to shoot. They drew nearer the bottom of the steps, but before they touched the first step Sud Ben Ali touched the trigger of his gun. The bullet snapped out and Frank heard Ace Johnson gasp. He glanced quickly at his friend but the airman was smiling.

"Only a scratch," he said. "Get going."

But it was easier said than done.

Sud Ben Ali knew that the two Englishmen would take any risks to save his prisoner, and knew also that it would be touch and go. If he could shoot Ace Johnson or Frank Mason he would gain a tremendous moral advantage, while he also badly wanted to kill Raj Waisi.

If Waisi was dead, then the tide of battle would almost certainly swing in the Turk's favour.

All the time this slow attack had been made on the steps, the battle had been raging about them, shrieks of battling natives had echoed to the dark heavens, and every moment there was the clatter of knives and swords, the occasional sharp crack of a rifle shot, and the thud and scuffling of hundreds of bare feet.

Twice again Sud Ben Ali shot towards the two Englishmen who were approaching him. Both times his bullets missed. Ace Johnson

knew that something had to be risked, and although he hated the need for taking the youngster into the line of danger he could see no other course of action.

Then suddenly Raj Waisi, who had momentarily disappeared, came to their side again.

Here was the opportunity which Sud Ben Ali wanted. With a fiendish expression on his evil face he pointed his gun at Raj Waisi's chest and touched the trigger!

A bullet snapped out and struck Raj Waisi full in the chest! Frank Mason saw the other stagger back and heard him gasp. Ace Johnson, who knew that the death of one leader or the other would almost certainly control the victory, felt a sudden surge of hopelessness.

Then, to their intense surprise, Raj Waisi pulled himself together and with a bull-like roar rushed up the steps towards his enemy, heedless of the bullets which hissed out time and time again and struck him!

Frank and Ace could hardly believe what was happening. Here was a man who seemed proof against bullets. Ace knew, moreover, that the effect of this amazing display would be considerable on the natives. A dozen men were watching the challenge between the two leaders, and when they saw the way in which Raj Waisi stood up against the bullets they threw up their arms and began to run.

Raj Waisi was a god! Nothing could kill him!

Ace knew that there must be an explanation of this strange development but he did not try to think about it at the moment. He rushed in Raj Waisi's wake, and Frank was not far behind.

Raj Waisi knew that he must not fire for there was a possibility of hitting the Englishman whom they had come to rescue. But he hardly needed to use his gun. With a few tremendous bounds he was on the top of the steps, and at the same moment Sud Ben Ali released Richard Mason and drew his knife from its sheath.

At the same instant Ace Johnson reached the top of the steps, and although Richard Mason was so weak that he could hardly stand Ace grabbed him and pulled him out of the danger line.

In a moment the two leaders had joined battle.

It was the most terrifying spectacle that Frank Mason had ever seen and despite the noise of the fight which was going on about them, despite the almost incredible fact that he had managed to rescue his father, he stared fascinated at the two combatants.

Sud Ben Ali was nearly as tall as Raj Waisi, but he had nothing like the breadth of shoulder and he was obviously the weaker man. But he was very agile, and his knife was flashing dangerously.

Raj Waisi seemed to ignore it.

He used neither knife nor gun but leapt at his man. After a minute it seemed that Sud Ben

Ali would pierce the other's chest with that quivering knife, and his arm swept downwards.

Frank gasped.

But then one of the most amazing things he had ever seen in his life happened. The steel of the blade struck against Raj Waisi's chest—and splintered into a hundred pieces!

The thing seemed to stun Sud Ben Ali and for a moment he was off his guard. Raj Waisi did not hesitate. He crashed into his enemy, and as they grappled the other jerked himself together. For a moment the two men wrestled, each fighting for his life as well as for victory. But there could be little doubt of the outcome. Gradually Sud Ben Ali was overwhelmed, and at last he lost consciousness. Raj Waisi had his tremendous fingers round the other's neck, and Sud Ben Ali's face was a mottled blue.

Frank had never seen anything so horrible in his life.

Despite that, however, he could not resist a tremendous feeling of triumph. Sud Ben Ali was defeated, whether he was dead or unconscious. And the news was rapidly getting round the stronghold, while the resistance of Sud Ben Ali's men weakened.

Now the cries and shouts of the fighting natives turned from those of rage to those of fear and triumph. Sud Ben Ali's men were on the run, for they knew they could expect little or no mercy, and Raj Waisi's warriors realised

that the battle was going in their favour and their triumphant cries echoed above every other sound.

While on the steps of the building which had been Sud Ben Ali's headquarters, Raj Waisi stood and smiled widely at the Englishmen, his great beard quivering.

"The civilized people have good things, yes? A steel waiscoat, it helps a lot, does it not?"

Frank drew a deep breath. So that was the explanation of what had appeared a miracle! Raj Waisi was wearing a steel bullet-proof waistcoat; consequently a bullet which would have otherwise killed him had bounced off, and the murderous knife had been shivered into hundreds of pieces.

Ace Johnson chuckled.

"You certainly did it well," he said. "I admit that I was afraid you were not going to have any luck "

"I would not call it luck," said Raj Waisi, who was still beaming. "I am glad to help you, Mr. Johnson. You have everything you desire?"

"I don't think there's much else that I want," admitted Ace Johnson. "But I would like to render first aid to my friend." As he spoke he turned towards Richard Mason. The Englishman had been without food for nearly forty-eight hours, and he had been tied up most of the time. Small wonder he was in a

bad way, and now the climax had come he had collapsed; but for Ace's supporting arm would have fallen.

Frank hurried to his father's side, alarmed by this development, but he need not have worried.

"He'll be all right," Ace assured him confidently.

"And I," said Raj Waisi, "will help you."

Without another word he let out a tremendous cry and a moment later a dozen men came hurrying towards him. By now the battle was practically over. Those of Sud Ben Ali's men who had not been taken prisoners or killed, were in full flight outside the walls of the fortress and a hundred or more of Raj Waisi's men were inside. Raj Waisi muttered something in that strange Eastern tongue, and within five minutes one of the battering rams which had been used to bring down the front gates of the stronghold was being hurled against the door of Sud Ben Ali's building. It needed only two or three thuds to force the door down. Raj Waisi entered his enemy's home, and immediately ordered his servants to do everything that Ace Johnson wanted.

Ace sent for water, and a little food. One or two frightened women servants of Sud Ben Ali's were only too glad to get whatever they wanted. Soon Richard Mason was conscious

again, and was able to eat a little fruit, which would keep him going until he had had a long rest.

Frank looked at Ace Johnson.

"Are we going back to Herat?" he asked.

"I don't think we'll start back to-night," said Ace Johnson. "Your father may rest, here, and we'll send a message back by one of Raj Waisi's men. You'd better start out and get hold of Kit and Alan."

Frank was pleased that there was no need to move his father again that night. He started off on his errand, but he had only reached the top of the steps when he saw his friend and Kit Warren hurrying towards him.

Very quickly he related what had happened, and soon all four of them were in a long, low room with Richard Mason.

The Englishman was absolutely exhausted, and he was lying full-length on a couch. Obviously he was badly in need of sleep, but he was too overjoyed to get off right away.

"You're sure Sud Ben Ali is finished?" he asked in a weak voice.

"I think you can rely on Raj Waisi not to let him get away," smiled Ace Johnson. "What was it the devil wanted?"

Mr. Mason smiled wanly.

"When he first started he was after revenge pure and simple," he said. "But then he heard a rumour that the expedition party of which I

was a member had discovered gold in the mountains."

"That was the information he wanted!" cried Frank. "And was it true?"

Mr. Mason nodded, and his eyes were gleaming.

"There is gold there," he said. "There's a fortune for anyone who can find the richest vein. When I'm better I'm going out to see what I can do!"

This development was the last which Frank and the others had expected. They had realised there must be something very out of the ordinary to have caused Sud Ben Ali to go to such lengths. But the thought of discovering a hitherto unknown goldfield was almost incredible. The prospect of going gold-hunting put the finishing touch to their adventure, and the tremendous excitement of the battle was almost forgotten.

That in itself seemed incredible—but as with most Englishmen and English lads once the danger was over it mattered nothing.

A moment later Raj Waisi entered the room, and he was beaming widely with triumph.

"Everything O.K.?" he asked, and the lads roared at the Americanism coming from that hoary old chieftain.

"Everything is," smiled Ace Johnson. "We'll get back to Herat to-morrow, and then we're going for a journey into the mountains."

"That is good," said Raj Waisi, and he left the room. As he went he passed a little man who had been crouching outside. He was so overwhelmed with the tremendous triumph which he had accomplished that he did not notice the man. Nor did Frank Mason or any of the others. But they would have been nothing like so gay-hearted had they seen him hurrying out of the building and across the stronghold, and slipping through the battered main gates.

While the rescue party and Richard Mason were resting at the stronghold, the little man—one of the crew of Sud Ben Ali's biplane—was hurrying across the foothills towards Herat. He had heard the whole of the conversation, and he knew that although there was no further chance of Sud Ben Ali trying to locate the goldfield there were others who would do so.

He reached the aerodrome, where Mustapha Bey was still a prisoner. At it happened the native guards were careless, and always glad to get money. By cunning and bribery the little spy managed to get Mustapha Bey away—and for a second time that swarthy-faced Turk had escaped from a prison in which Ace Johnson had put him.

Mustapha Bey learned what the spy had to say and his eyes smouldered.

"Now that Sud Ben Ali has gone," he said harshly, "there will be more for us. Organise a party of fifty to follow the Englishmen!"

The little man salaamed and hurried away. Soon afterwards preparations were on foot for the expedition to be followed, and Mustapha Bey believed that he would find them easy victims once the goldfield was located.

Over that brave band of fliers from England danger still hovered!

CHAPTER XX

THE GOLDFIELD

It was three days before the five adventurers reached Herat. On the second day of their stay with Raj Waisi, who did everything possible to make them comfortably at home, they had roamed about the fortress and the surrounding foothills, amazed at a great deal of what they saw. Morra and one or two of the warriors acted as their guides, and most of the day the two lads were on their own, apart from these natives. Kit Warren, Ace Johnson and Richard Mason had a great deal of business to discuss, and plans to prepare.

It was surely the most fascinating experience that two lads could have had. The foothills were very rocky, and in the light of day they had a better idea of the remarkable climb that they had had on the night when they had come to Richard Mason's rescue.

All manner of different shrubs and flora grew on the hillsides, and the rocks seemed to be of a dozen different colours. On one occasion when they were at the stronghold Richard Mason assured them that there were many rich deposits of minerals hidden in these rocks, valuable in themselves but practically worthless as it was

almost impossible to work the neighbourhood. No trains could get near the hills, and there was practically no means of transport.

They thoroughly enjoyed the short stay, but naturally they were all agog to be getting onwards on their journey. The possibility of hunting for gold had exceeded their wildest dreams, and they felt ready for anything.

The youngsters as well as the older members of the party were tremendously relieved at feeling there was no danger threatening from Sud Ben Ali. No message had come from Herat to tell them of the disappearance of Mustapha Bey and they had no knowledge that there was a possibility of a threat from any other source.

On the last night of their stay at the stronghold, Raj Waisi insisted on entertaining them to a wonderful feast. All manner of unusual foods were served, and the feast was held in the open air, with hundreds of small fires burning about the stronghold. It was, the youngsters learned, the celebration which Raj Waisi would have had on any case to signify the great victory which he and his tribe had achieved. It was an unusual thing for white men to be asked to take part in these celebrations, and it was not difficult for them to understand why. After the actual feast—when Raj Waisi ate enough for ten men!—some of the natives joined together in weird dances which must have rivalled those of the dervishes,

witch-doctors and various tribal dances anywhere in the world.

It was fascinating, and it was difficult for either lad to tear their eyes away from the spectacle. It was over at last, however, and Raj Waisi stalked away towards his house—although, of course, it was unusual for an Afghan Chieftain to live in a house, but Waisi did not intend to allow the building which he had taken from Sud Ben Ali to be wasted—saying that he proposed to sleep for a week to recover from the effects of his orgy.

The party from England decided that he was joking, but on the following morning Raj Waisi was not up to bid them adieu. The money which Ace Johnson had promised had been paid over, with considerable interest, and the lads bade good-bye to the stronghold without shaking hands with that ferocious yet kind-hearted old Afghan chief.

John Withers met them in Herat, and he was delighted at the success of their errand. When he learned that Sud Ben Ali was dead—and without any doubt this time, for Raj Waisi had made sure of that—he was extremely pleased. The news was flashed to the Egyptian and Turkish Governments that the criminal who had caused tremendous trouble to the authorities in both countries had finished his nefarious activities.

The news that Mustapha Bey had managed

to escape was unpleasant, but after a round-table talk the Englishmen decided that there was no likelihood of bother from that source.

"In all probability," said John Withers, "the man will hurry back to Turkey as fast as he can. Sud Ben Ali was the leader and naturally that means his organisation will be useless."

The others were convinced of this and preparations were made immediately for the trek across the hills towards the secret goldfield.

Richard Mason, fully recovered now from the effects of his ordeal, had been in communication with the members of his party at Karachi. The news that he was in Herat had caused considerable surprise but the three other Englishmen who had shared the discovery of the goldfield flew from Karachi to Herat, making the party eight strong, while there were two dozen natives, guides, and carriers to go with them.

As it happened Herat was one of the nearest air bases to the goldfield, and the Englishmen decided to make the journey by foot all the way. As far as they could calculate it was about sixty miles from Herat and did not seem a terrifying journey.

It was a different proposition when they came to walk it!

They did extremely well to cover ten miles in a day, and one day the country was so

difficult that they could only travel four miles. The heat during the day was tremendous, but at night the cold was intense. The tremendously high altitude, of course, accounted for this. The youngsters were glad that the older members of the expedition had had previous experience in this kind of journey, and that sleeping-bags were carried for warmth at night.

On the fifth day the intrepid adventurers reached a valley which was almost completely surrounded by mountains. The track that led up to it was so narrow that it seemed impossible that any human being could climb it. Nonetheless all of them succeeded, and eventually they were standing at the top of a track and looking down over the valley of gold.

Mr. Mason's eyes were gleaming as he pointed downwards, and the other members of his own expedition were equally excited.

"Down there," cried Mr. Mason, "are gold deposits that will be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds! In three or four days we should find which is the best way to the valley for operating, and then as quickly as we can we shall file a claim on the district and begin working operations."

"Has no claim yet been made?" asked Frank Mason.

"No," said his father. "It's only possible, you see, to stake a claim of a certain size. If we had staked one we might have found that

there were richer deposits only a few hundred yards away, and other people who will definitely follow us would have gained the rewards of our endeavours. But there's no need to worry."

Little did he know the truth!

Dusk was threatening as they began to climb down into the valley and it was not long before they were looking out for a good place to pitch their camp. Possibility of pursuit had not occurred to them and they did not select it with a view to possible cover in the event of attack.

They chose a fairly big area, which was comparatively flat, and the natives settled down on the outside edge, burning camp fires to keep away any wild animals which might have appeared. The eight people from England were gathered in the centre of the encampment, four sleeping side by side and head to head with the other four.

The darkness had fallen completely, and all the explorers were tired out. They had no trouble in getting to sleep, for they trusted their guides implicitly to warn them should there be any threat of trouble.

But for Morra, who was prepared for trouble, they would all have been massacred. He was not too happy about the situation for he knew that certain tribes in this part of Afghanistan were liable to make sudden, unexpected attacks on any small bands of travellers. Consequently

he kept awake for several hours, and he was practically deciding that there was no possibility of an attack when he believed that he saw some dark shapes move at the outer edge of the encampment.

Morra knew there was only one way to act.

He drew his revolver and fired at a shape. The crack of the shot echoed throughout the hillside and in a trice the others were on their feet, most of them bewildered but all grabbing at their guns. Then suddenly the silence of the night was shattered by a dozen shots from different directions, and the air seemed filled with leaping, shrieking figures.

Frank and Alan were quickly awake, and aware of the trouble, and they could only compare this unexpected attack to the fight which they had seen in Sud Ben Ali's stronghold.

But there was a difference!

When Raj Waisi had attacked the stronghold Sud Ben Ali's men had been quick in the defence. But the carriers and guides who had come from Herat had only one thought—their own safety.

They made not even the slightest pretence of a fight but ran helter-skelter for cover. The little band of eight Englishmen—for Frank and Alan pulled their weight as well as any man—were surrounded by Mustapha Bey's gang of fifty war-like tribesmen, and it was

obvious that they were going to be hard-pushed.

Frank told himself that he would have given practically anything for a machine-gun—naturally one of those weapons of death had not been brought with the party. Taking advantage of all the shelter which their baggage provided, the Englishmen did their best to fight off the attack, although in the darkness it was practically impossible. All the time bullets were humming, pecking into the luggage, and twice Frank Mason heard one of his father's friends cry out in sudden pain.

Two of the defence were useless!

The battle was getting more and more desperate. Mustapha Bey's men knew it was madness to get too close, but they had a definite target at which to fire. Still the bullets hummed towards the defenders, and suddenly Kit Warren muttered an exclamation and dropped his gun.

"Badly hurt?" snapped Alan Blair.

"Got my hand," snapped Kit Warren. "I can't shoot."

So there were only five of them able to shoot now, and any moment the odds might become still more overwhelming.

There was no hint of desperation in the Englishman's manner, although all of them were prepared for the worst. Whether this was an attack by a wandering tribe, or whether there was some definite object behind it none,

of them knew, and none of them cared. The importance of the gold seemed to fade, for all they cared for was the saving of their lives.

Could they escape? Or would this expedition end in complete disaster?

It was a question which none of them could answer.

How long the battle had lasted none of them knew, but the first streaks of the Afghan dawn were creeping across the skies when Alan Blair turned to his friend and said in a whisper:

"We can't last much longer, Frank."

Frank Mason managed to smile.

"We've had our money's worth anyhow," he said. "I——"

And then he stopped speaking, and the other four members of the party who were still unhurt stared across the foothills in absolute astonishment. For the rocks and boulders were gradually taking shape, and they could see the tribesmen who had been shooting at them until a few minutes before.

The tribesmen were not shooting now! With one accord they were running *away* from the encampment, and as they went they were screaming in alarm. What had happened?

It seemed a miracle, yet there was a very good explanation, and it was not long in coming.

For suddenly the little party of defenders heard the smacking of bullets against the boulders and in the distance they saw the yellow streaks of rifle fire. Very soon it grew obvious that there was a second and much larger party attacking their enemy.

From their encampment the Englishmen watched them, hoping desperately that the new party would be friendly. There was just the possibility that they were a marauding band engaged in combat just as Sud Ben Ali's and Raj Waisi's tribes had fought and that when the battle was decided the victorious tribe would turn on the Englishmen.

It was Frank Mason who solved the problem.

The attacking natives were getting rapidly nearer, and the men who had fought against the Englishmen had now disappeared, although many of them were lying dead or wounded among the rocks. Hurrying upwards towards the summit of the path over which they had trekked, Frank saw a tremendous fantastic figure running like the wind and bellowing at the top of his voice.

It was Raj Waisi!

Within five minutes the chieftain had reached the Englishmen, and as he came his great beard was quivering and he was laughing uproariously.

Ace Johnson leapt towards him, his hand outstretched.

"How on earth did you get here?" he cried.

"You do me good turn," said Raj Waisi. "I do you good turn. One of my men told me someone follow you. I follow them."

"Thank Heavens you did," said Ace Johnson. "We should have been finished had you failed to come."

"That was what I think," said Raj Waisi, "but no matter. Are you hungry? Because I am!"

Thus it was that the expedition which threatened to end in tragedy reached a note of jollity and revelry. Raj Waisi was a man who was always hungry and the pick of the Englishmen's provisions were placed at his disposal. Raj Waisi displayed no curiosity as to the reason for the trip in the hills, but Ace Johnson suggested to Mr. Mason that it would be a good thing to tell him something of it.

"Then he can have a claim when we've selected ours," said Ace.

Mr. Mason was enthusiastic about the idea, and the Afghan chieftain could hardly believe his ears when the offer was made. He had always dreamed of riches, but riches like the gold which was to be found in the valley were beyond his wildest dreams.

For the gold was there!

Most of it was actually on the surface of

the ground, and the explorers would be able to take a great deal of it away with them in their pockets. The three wounded men were not badly hurt, but they were as overjoyed as the others at the development.

It was towards nightfall that day when the next unexpected thing happened.

Raj Waisi, whose eyes were much keener than the Englishmen's, pointed suddenly towards the skies.

"The great eagle!" he cried.

The lads knew that by 'eagle' Raj Waisi meant an aeroplane, and they stared in the direction of his pointing finger. Soon they were able to see a dark streak against the blue skies, and suddenly the shape of the aeroplane materialised.

The same question was in all their minds. Who was flying towards this valley? Was it possible that someone else had heard of the valley of gold, or was this a friendly visit?

They spoke very little in the next few minutes, but all of them were waiting tensely for the machine to land. Not for a minute did they dream who it was!

CHAPTER XXI

THE HOME FLIGHT

THE aeroplane which was flying towards that lonely spot of the Afghan Hills was rapidly looming larger. Now the men on the ground could make out the twin engines, but none of them recognised the 'plane.

"It's a big fellow," said Ace Johnson thoughtfully. "Morra, have you got some glasses in the case?"

"Yes, sir," said the little Egyptian, and he hurried off to get the long-distance glasses while the others craned their necks to try and see who was in the aeroplane.

They could make out the heads and shoulders of two men soon. The monoplane circled round and round, getting lower every time, but still it was impossible for the men on the ground to see the occupants clearly enough to identify them.

But Morra quickly arrived with the glasses, and Ace put them to his eyes.

By that time the monoplane was very low, and was obviously making for a landing at once. Even with his naked eye it was possible for the Englishman to see the man staring out of the window with the glasses at his eyes.

The 'plane was roaring above them now and the hills shook with the din. Less than fifty yards above them—forty yards—thirty.

And then Ace Johnson spoke, his voice terribly grim.

"Fire at them! It's Mustapha Bey!"

The Turk *had* followed them!

Frank darted to one of the rifles nearby, but Kit Warren and his father started first. The guns at their shoulders, they began to fire—and with good reason!

For Mustapha Bey had seen the white men, and he had realised that his plans had been foiled. He had expected to find his own fighters in possession of the valley; instead of that they had been defeated.

Mustapha Bey was not at the controls; the men on the ground could not see the pilot. But the man must have pulled sharply on the joystick, for the 'plane began to climb.

As it did so, the window opened and the muzzle of a machine-gun poked out!

"Find cover!" cried Ace Johnson.

The others obeyed, excepting Mr. Martin and Kit Warren, who continued to fire as quickly as they could at the rapidly rising monoplane. Soon the others began to fire, but it seemed that Mustapha Bey had managed to escape, although he had failed to do any damage and the hail of bullets from the machine-gun had hit no one.

The Home Flight 241

Then suddenly Frank Mason saw the tail of the 'plane dip!

For a moment he could hardly believe that it was happening. Then Ace cried out:

"They're hit!"

It was then that the two lads watched the struggle in the air—different this time from anything they had ever seen before. The pilot of the monoplane was fighting, not against enemy craft, but against the danger of crashing!

Some vital part of the machine had been hit by the rifle bullets, and the 'plane could not keep up. The question on all their lips was whether it would crash, sending the occupants to their death, or whether the pilot would be able to make a landing.

Now the 'plane was swinging from one side to the other. It was perilously near the ground, less than a hundred feet up. Once Frank and Alan thought it was finished. It seemed to drop like a bomb; then somehow the pilot managed to twist it, and flew straight again, but the nose was pointing downwards.

The machine would land—or fall—about a quarter of a mile from the encampment. The party on the ground began to run towards it, with Raj Waisi easily in the lead.

Time and time again the crash seemed inevitable. Landing on that rocky surface would be almost impossible without a crash.

The Flying Turk

Down—down—down!

Swaying this way and that, now raising little, now falling, the monoplane came down. Then, when the party of men were within two hundred yards, it crashed!

It seemed to shudder from nose to tail, and then it dropped. Close to the ground though it was the noise of the crash echoed and re-echoed about the hillside. There was a tremendous cloud of dust as the ill-fated 'plane struck the ground, nose first.

Its tail reared upwards, then crashed down. There was a second crash, and it was impossible for the men running towards it to be sure whether there was any possibility of saving the occupants.

The one great fear was fire.

But no flames came. Soon Kit Warren and Ace Johnson were by the side of the wreckage, with Raj Waisi just ahead of them. They began to move some of the debris. The others hurried up and joined them.

Was Mustapha Bey and his companion dead or alive?

The men were caught amid the wreckage and but for the prompt assistance of the men they had attacked, would never have been extricated. As it was, Mustapha Bey was in a very bad way, and it was doubtless whether his life could be saved.

The other man was dead.

The Home Flight 243

Frank Mason and Alan Blair saw him, and gasped in dismay. Ace Johnson stared down at the man's set face, and for a moment he said nothing. Then very quietly:

"So he worked against us, too!"

For the dead flier was the Englishman who had pretended to be such a help—John Withers, the government official at Herat!

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A rather grim party began their trek back across the hills towards Herat, four days later.

Mustapha Bey, had joined his chief; and the Turk was buried next to the Englishman on the side of one of the mountains. Very little had been said about them, and all the men had worked hard on the gold claim.

But there had not been the same spirit behind their work.

The fact that Withers, who had apparently helped them, had been lured by gold to work for Sud Ben Ali and Mustapha Bey, was a great shock.

It was on the first day of the return trek that Frank Mason and Alan Blair talked about the man.

"I can't understand why he recommended us to Raj Waisi," Frank said helplessly. "But for that we would have never won."

Ace Johnson looked very grim.

"I think it is easily explained," he said.

"Withers wanted us to join in the battle. He must have known the fight would come eventually. And he wanted you to die in it—all of us, for that matter! Then it would have been reported that we had died in a frontier battle with hostile tribes. No one would have suspected him, or the part that Sud Ben Ali played in the affair."

Frank Mason looked very glum.

"What a despicable trick?" he exclaimed.

"It was despicable," admitted his father. "But the lure of gold is very strong."

"It must be," said Alan Blair. "But how do you think the attack on us was worked?"

"It seems fairly certain that Mustapha Bey used spies at the stronghold," said Ace. "Then he probably organised a small band of fifty or sixty people—or may even have used a small tribal chieftain. We were followed and attacked. Again our deaths would have been put down to trouble with the warlike Afghan tribes. Then Mustapha Bey and John Withers would have 'discovered' the gold field."

"It certainly fits in," admitted Alan Blair; and all of them knew that they were very near the truth.

There was very little to discuss.

They reached Herat after three days of hard trekking, and there parted company with Raj Waisi. The old chieftain—who had known the possibility of danger to his white friends, had

followed them to make sure they were safe. The parting was warm, and there was always the chance that they would see the man again, if ever they were fortunate enough to revisit India.

The claim for the gold in the valley was made, and there was no doubt but that all the members of the expedition—the two fliers as well as the original members—would never want for money again.

For a few days the lads stayed at Herat, walking about the Afghan town, spending fascinated hours in the native quarters and the bazaars. Both Alan and Frank felt that they could have stayed there for ever!

"I daresay you do," laughed Mr. Mason when they said as much. "But we've been here nearly a fortnight, and by the time we get to Karachi it will be time to start back for England. Don't forget you're still schoolboys."

Alan and Frank stared at each other and then at Frank's father.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Alan, "I *had* forgotten it!"

"No such luck for you," smiled Mr. Mason.

Actually they had another week in India, spending most of the time among the native quarters of the various towns at which they stayed. They used the *Hawk* and the *Swallow* for the journeys from one place to the other, and during the course of it, Kit taught Alan

Blair how to pilot a 'plane, and Ace Johnson did the same for Frank Mason.

Sometimes they kept the 'planes going for hours at a stretch, and after the first thrill they agreed with Ace and Kit that the actual flying was monotonous, but when there was trouble there was plenty of excitement.

They were talking about this in their hotel at Karachi on the day before the return flight to England. Mr. Mason had his legs stretched out in front of him, and was smoking a cherished briar.

"I should think you two have had excitement enough for a lifetime," he said. "I know I have!"

"I'd like to go through it again," said Alan quickly.

"Hallo, a young fire-eater, is he?" laughed Ace Johnson. Then he grew serious. "You certainly did wonderfully well, youngsters, but I'm still waiting for trouble from Mr. Mason, for letting you come."

Mr. Mason laughed.

"I can imagine it would have been a hard job to stop them," he said. "But if I'd guessed what was going to happen we would never have started out for England. I wanted to give Frank some fun this holiday, but I didn't think he'd get so much!"

"It started pretty quickly," smiled Frank. "I still can't properly understand why Sud

The Home Flight 247

Ben Ali first tried to bomb the air-liner. It seems so strange."

"I told you he discovered about the goldmine afterwards," said Ace Johnson.

"It hardly seems a strong enough reason," said Frank thoughtfully. "To bomb an air-liner with several people in it, simply for revenge."

Mr. Mason shook his head.

"I agree with you," he said, "and I've an idea that Sud Ben Ali knew about the goldmine all the time—and wanted to try to prevent me from getting there again."

"How would that have worked out?" asked Alan.

"This way," said Mr. Mason. "I've learned that my other friends were attacked in Karachi. You see, we had made a report that we believed we'd found gold. If Sud Ben Ali could have killed us, that report would never have been received by the authorities, and there would never have been any suspicion against him. Revenge was part of the motive—greed the other part."

"But all's well that ends well," said Ace Johnson. "I'm going down to see some friends for an hour. Will you fellows start packing? We want to be off at dawn to-morrow."

Frank, Alan and Mr. Mason went to their rooms to start getting their things ready, while Kit Warren went with Ace. Mr. Mason's other

friends lived in Karachi, and were at their respective homes.

The two youngsters could not stop talking about the affair, and they relived the time from the moment that they had first seen a bomb dropping towards the *Cloud*.

Everything had been so cleverly worked that it seemed impossible that they could have escaped.

"Might was on the side of right," smiled Mr. Mason. "It doesn't always work out that way, but I'm glad it did this time. But no more unexpected holidays for you, Frank, until you're a bit older. And what Alan's father would say if he knew the whole truth, I'd hate to know!"

Alan chuckled, but Frank looked thoughtful.

"Those days seem ever so long ago," he said. "It doesn't seem possible that we're actually going back to England."

"This will seem like a dream when we start school again," said Frank. "Anyhow, we'll have something to talk about, and we can pilot aeroplanes!"

"You're pretty good at the controls," admitted his father. "And that's more than I am." He smiled at his son, and then frowned. "Now then, young fellow, what's biting you?"

For Frank was staring at him as though he'd seen a ghost. Then the youngster clenched

his fists and shook it playfully under his father's nose.

"You scamp!" he exclaimed. "When you first told me about this you said you'd come over for some special medicines that could only be obtained in London or New York!"

Mr. Mason smiled, but looked serious.

"It was true," he said. "We needed those medicines, for there is a fever up in the hills which, unless a certain drug is used, causes death in a very few days. And our expedition did start off as a medical one. But the lure of gold is considerable. And it has more uses than one. Kit and Ace will be rich and they deserve to be."

"I'll second that," smiled Frank Mason.

"But I have enough money for my needs, and for yours," said his father. "So most of our share of the gold will be devoted to medical research. So I wasn't pulling your leg, young fellow!"

None of them talked a great deal after that.

The whole affair was finished, and the rogues had been found out—even the 'friend' who had professed to help them. It was a grim story, and in some ways it seemed impossible that it had ever happened.

But it would live in their minds for ever.

So would the return trip to England.

They took four days, stopping again at Aleppo and Marseilles. Frank and Alan, who

were as familiar with the controls of an aeroplane as they were on a bicycle, flew a great deal of the way, although when they reached England they would have to wait for some time before they were old enough to hold a pilot's certificate.

They saw the Captain of the Gendarmes at Marseilles, and the aerodrome manager—people they were to meet again several times, for their love of air travel never deserted them.

Then over the English Channel, until the white cliffs of Dover were in sight. They lived again those grim minutes while they had been bombed from the air, and they hoped to meet Captain Dennis and his assistant at Croydon.

They missed him, but later in the year they met him again. They had made many friends by their bravery and courage, and they had learned a great deal. Moreover they had been through an experience which could never have been equalled by lads of their own age.

Yet strangely enough when they returned to school for the Christmas term, they talked very little about it. It was something that they could keep to themselves, an adventure which they would always treasure and which would prove a bond of friendship between them that would never be broken.

